

Chapter 1

An Owl Gathering

On a mild day in late July, a teenager was walking home from the downtown area, such as it was, of Little Whinging. The city did not have a train station, a department store, or even a large supermarket; just a few dozen shops, a bank, a police station, and a library. It was the library from which soon-to-be-sixteen-year-old Harry Potter was returning, with an old bookbag around his shoulder. He looked around from time to time as he walked. It looked as though he were admiring the trees and bushes, which had recovered nicely from last year's drought, but he actually was wondering whether there was anyone following him. Or, more precisely, whether he could catch a glimpse of the person he knew must be following him. All he could see, however, were the normal sights of a suburban neighborhood, and a few people looking at him rather oddly as they passed him. Harry briefly wondered why—after all, he was not exactly famous in this area, nor was his scar—until he realized that looking around to see if you were being followed was not exactly usual behavior.

Harry did not particularly care what constituted usual behavior, probably because his Aunt Petunia constantly badgered him whenever he did anything outside of her strict notions of it, even when it was harmless. He was also used to people staring at him with a kind of sad look on their faces. In the wizarding world, the one in which he spent most of his time and considered his true home, it was because of the lightning-shaped scar on his forehead and what it represented. In this, the Muggle, or non-wizarding world, it was because of his normally shabby and ill-fitting clothes. Petunia and her husband Vernon usually refused to buy him any new clothes, always giving him clothes that his cousin Dudley was finished with, regardless of the fact that the two boys' builds were very different.

Harry knew that his clothes could not be the reason for any stares today, though. His clothes, for the first time he could remember outside the wizarding world, fit properly and made him look perfectly ordinary. In early July, a few days after he'd returned home for the summer from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Petunia had abruptly told him to get in the car, and without a word had taken him to the next town's second-hand clothing store, and picked him out a pair of jeans and a couple of shirts, all the while looking at him as though a great honor was being done him which he absolutely did not deserve. Harry knew that it was not spending the money that bothered her—the Dursleys had more than enough money, which they spent lavishly on Dudley—but rather the fact that she felt obliged to do it at all. Harry said little throughout the whole excursion, with a simple "thanks" to

Petunia after she paid for the clothes. She ignored the gesture as she headed out to the car, leaving him to follow.

It was clear to Harry, though he wisely did not venture this opinion to his aunt, that she was buying him clothes because of what some of his friends in the wizarding world had said to the Dursleys when they had come to pick Harry up at King's Cross at the end of the most recent term. Remus Lupin, Arthur Weasley, Nymphadora Tonks, and, most threateningly, Mad-Eye Moody had told the Dursleys in no uncertain terms that if Harry were "mistreated" in any way, the Dursleys would have to answer to them. The Dursleys seemed to have taken this warning to heart, especially as they were unsure that they would have the same notion of what constituted "mistreatment" as did the wizards who gave them the warning. As a result, Harry was having the best, or rather, least unpleasant summer he'd ever had at the Dursleys. He was allowed to watch TV if someone else was watching it first, though his aunt and uncle had a tendency to leave a room soon after Harry entered it intending to stay for a while. He was not asked to do any chores, though he learned not to be around while Petunia was doing them, as she tended to throw him very nasty looks while she worked, no doubt resentful that she couldn't make him do the work that she had in summers past. She had even grudgingly acquiesced when he asked her to sign the form so that he could get a library card, which he was sure she never would have done before. The sole price he had to pay for this was a steely silence from all three Dursleys, and even that was better than the irritated bluntness with which he'd always been addressed by them.

Thinking of this caused him to feel a surge of gratitude toward Moody and the rest as he walked home, and he even forgot about trying to spot who was following him. It was for his own protection, he knew, though that did not make it any less irritating at times. Professor Dumbledore had increased Harry's protection a little over a year ago when Lord Voldemort had returned from near-death. Harry knew that Voldemort considered Harry's death a high priority, now that he would no longer be able to deceive Harry with false visions as he had a month ago, leading Harry to a confrontation at the Ministry of Magic, in the Department of Mysteries. That confrontation had one very positive effect-the wizarding world knew without any doubt that Voldemort had in fact returned, and was now mobilizing against him. It had also, however, led to the death of Harry's godfather Sirius Black, the adult to whom he'd felt closest in the world. Harry knew that there were many who would have felt that it was worth one life to vastly strengthen the opposition to Voldemort, but he personally would have given anything to somehow reverse what had happened.

Almost a month after Sirius's death, Harry still felt the loss keenly, even though he was over the worst of his mourning. For the first three weeks after

returning to the Dursleys', he was completely withdrawn. He stayed in his room almost all the time when not eating, and spoke only when he had to. Last July, after Voldemort came back, he had felt restless, like a caged animal, desperate to know what was happening in the outside world; this July, he didn't care. Owls from Hermione and Ron didn't cheer him up, and he wrote only brief, desultory responses.

Harry stopped and looked around the street, then up at the partly cloudy sky, and wondered where Sirius was, if he could be considered to be anywhere. It was not something he had thought that much about before, even though both his parents were dead; that had happened so long ago that he was more or less used to it. He was not at all used to Sirius being dead, and it was rare that an hour went by that he did not think of Sirius. This was what had prompted his interest in the library; he had walked up to the counter and said to the librarian, "I'm looking for books about what happens to people after they die." The librarian gave him a sad little smile—was it that obvious that he'd lost someone?—and led him to the books on religion and spirituality. Harry had spent some time glancing through them, and picked out three that seemed to speak to what he was looking for. He knew there were no solid answers, of course, but he wanted to get a sense of what the possibilities were. He looked up at the sky, wondering if there was such a thing as heaven, and if there was, would Sirius like it there? It sounded very pleasant, but a little boring, and he knew Sirius would want to be someplace where there was action, something interesting happening. Harry knew that he would probably never know for sure, but as he looked at the sky, he hoped Sirius was happy, wherever he was. He had gotten a bad deal in this life; he deserved better in the next one, if there was one.

Such thoughts still consumed Harry's attention as he entered the Dursley residence, which was officially his home but did not feel like one to him. It was a little past three o'clock, and Petunia was walking through the house putting away laundry. Harry glanced into the living room to see Dudley playing video games. He smiled and gave Dudley a cheerful wave, to which Dudley responded by flinching and returning to his video game with increased focus. Harry knew that he'd been a bit malicious, in that Dudley had been terrified of him since last summer, when a dementor attack meant for Harry had almost killed Dudley. Harry knew that Dudley had ample reason to know that Harry had not been responsible for the attack, and even that Harry had saved Dudley's life. Harry also understood, however, that Dudley knew that the most traumatic event in his life would never have happened had Harry not been around, and that was enough for Dudley to not want to ever be around Harry, even at the dinner table. Given his past experiences with Dudley, this suited Harry fine.

Harry walked up the stairs to his bedroom and put his bag down onto the bed. He looked up at the owl cage to say hello to Hedwig, but it was empty. He wondered why she was gone; since it was daylight, she couldn't be hunting. He found himself hoping he might be getting mail; he had discovered that Hedwig had a way of anticipating when one of his friends wanted to write to him but had no access to an owl. Since Ron had his own owl, Pigwidgeon, Harry suspected that he might get mail from Hermione, who did not live in the wizarding world during the summer and so could not always find an owl. Harry found himself wondering how Hedwig could possibly know enough to go out and seek mail for him, and then he thought, probably the same way that owls know how to find the recipient of any letter. He then idly wondered what would happen if he wrote Sirius a letter and told Hedwig to deliver it. Would she refuse to even try? Would she go straight to twelve Grimmauld Place, Sirius's last residence? Or would she search the earth forever, always looking but never finding? It was this last possibility that stopped Harry from considering the idea further.

His reverie was interrupted by a flash of light, followed by the sudden appearance of Fawkes, Professor Dumbledore's phoenix. Harry had seen Fawkes disappear in a similar fashion, but never appear; he sat up in bed, curious. Fawkes glided over to him and dropped a letter into his lap. Harry opened it; it read, 'Would you mind a short visit? You can give your answer to Fawkes, he will understand it.'

Harry wasn't sure he was in the mood for a visit, but he felt he should say yes. He nodded, even though he assumed Fawkes wouldn't understand the gesture. "Tell him I said yes," he said to Fawkes, who disappeared a second later. He didn't know what he would say to Dumbledore, but he figured that Dumbledore had something to say to him, or else he wouldn't be coming.

He barely had time to think any more than that, as a few seconds later, Dumbledore appeared in the middle of the bedroom, accompanied by the popping noise of an Apparation. "Hello, Harry. May I?" he asked, gesturing to the bottom of the bed. Harry gestured for him to go ahead, and Dumbledore sat. Regarding Harry with compassion, Dumbledore asked, "How are you doing?"

"All right, I guess," replied Harry, not in the mood to go into detail about how he had felt since returning from Hogwarts. More because he felt as though it was expected than because he really wanted to know, he added, "How about you?"

"Reasonably well, thank you," said Dumbledore politely. "I have been very busy, of course. Now that the Ministry has accepted the fact of Voldemort's return, there has been much for me to do, for the Order to do in assisting the Ministry. The Order will continue operating independently; it is more that we are bringing the Ministry up

to date. But it has not been a good time, of course. Sirius's death has weighed heavily on me."

Harry felt by looking at Dumbledore's face that this was true, but he still said, "You fought Voldemort before. You must have lost lots of people."

Dumbledore nodded gravely. "Yes, I have. But it never becomes any less painful. Especially when, in such a case as this, there was so much I could have done to prevent it."

Harry looked down uncomfortably. Part of him didn't want to talk about Sirius's death, but he didn't want Dumbledore feeling the way he clearly did. "It wasn't your fault, Professor. I don't blame you for what happened."

"Thank you, Harry, I appreciate that," said Dumbledore sincerely. "The fact is that on reflection, I accept that. What I said right after it happened was said in the emotion of the situation. I blamed myself, as I tend to do when someone for whom I have taken responsibility is killed. Now I understand, of course, that it was no one's fault. That is, no one but the one who performed the act itself. As for the rest of it..." Dumbledore paused to collect his thoughts. He turned his head to look Harry in the eye, and continued, "We all do our best, and things happen that we do not expect and did not foresee, even if after the fact it seems obvious in retrospect. It is useless to spend time blaming ourselves. It is also unavoidable, and very... human. In time, we learn to accept the truth."

Harry looked down again, wondering whether Dumbledore was referring to himself or to Harry. Maybe both, he thought. Lost in thought for a minute, he looked up at Dumbledore, who seemed perfectly content to sit in silence. Finally feeling as though he should say something, he asked, "Was there a reason you came here, Professor?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "It is nothing to do with Hogwarts or the Order. I just wanted to visit you, to see how you were doing."

Harry thought to respond, 'You couldn't have done that last year at this time?' but it seemed too rude. Even so, he couldn't help but say, "So, you don't think it's dangerous to look at me anymore."

Even though the words themselves were neutral, Dumbledore looked down, as if chastised; Harry half-realized that his tone and expression had made the statement an accusation. "I am sorry about that. I know it must have seemed to you as though I were indifferent to your situation; I hope you will believe me when I say that I was deeply concerned. I placed a priority on your safety which came at the expense of your emotional well-being, and I now feel I may have taken things too far in that direction. I was... afraid for you. I can only say that I will try to make it up to you, if you will allow me to do so."

Harry found he was embarrassed at Dumbledore seeming to find it necessary to ask for his forgiveness. "You don't have to make anything up to me, Professor. I just... hope you'll tell me things instead of not telling me things. I don't get scared that easily, and I'd rather know what he's trying to do to me, so I can fight him."

Dumbledore nodded. "That is one of the ways I plan to make it up to you. As for right now, there is simply not much to report. Voldemort is still keeping a low profile, but now that the Ministry is mobilizing against him, that will probably not continue for long. You have my word that you will be kept informed of any developments."

"Thank you, Professor," said Harry.

There was another silence, as Harry again felt he should say something, but couldn't think of anything. Seeming to sense this, Dumbledore stood. "Well, then, I believe I will be getting back. If there is anything I can do for you, please do not hesitate to send Hedwig along." Harry nodded, and Dumbledore Disapparated.

Harry lay back down on the bed, staring at the ceiling. He had spent much of the past three weeks doing that, but he now had something new to think about.

A week later, as Harry was returning from the bathroom to his bedroom, he heard the phone ringing downstairs. He would have ignored it, but had a strange feeling that he should see who it was. He headed downstairs as he heard Petunia say "Hello?" followed by "No, he isn't," in an irritated way that suggested that he was somehow involved. Harry looked up at her, expectantly. His aunt appeared to be struggling, weighing her natural desire not to want Harry to have any outside contact with what she considered "those freaks" against the possibility that one of those very people might be on the other end of the line, and unhappy that they were not allowed to talk to Harry. She silently handed the phone to Harry and walked away.

"Hello?" Harry said uncertainly. He had hardly ever spoken on the phone before.

"Hi, Harry!" a familiar female voice said excitedly. "It's me, Hermione!"

"Hermione! Wow, I'm really surprised. I never get any calls. I was wondering who could possibly be calling for me." Harry sounded very pleased, which he was.

"Well, I was thinking of sending an owl, and Hedwig just showed up, but I thought that since we both have phones, I'd give this a try. Also, I know how it is for you in the summer, being all alone, well not really alone, exactly, but you know what I mean..."

"It's very close to that, trust me," Harry said emphatically. As he looked around to make sure he wasn't being overheard, he added, "They usually give me a

hard time about one thing or another, but this summer it's been more like I'm a bomb they're afraid of setting off. They have as little to do with me as possible. Not that that's a bad thing, compared to usual. It has to be because of the warning Moody and the rest gave them."

"Yes, I was just thinking that," Hermione agreed. "In fact, I was wondering whether they'd let me talk to you at all. Your aunt said you weren't home at first. Well, anyway... I was going to ask how you were doing, but I guess you've kind of already told me, haven't you?"

"Yeah, that's pretty much it. Just counting down the days until we're back at Hogwarts and trying to keep busy. There's not that much to do around here."

"You could always read 'Hogwarts, A History,'" she teased.

"I suppose I could," Harry answered, as if she were serious. "I've been meaning to do that at some point, believe it or not."

"Oh, and speaking of days," Hermione continued, "I just wanted to say 'Happy Birthday!'"

"That's not until tomorrow," Harry pointed out, though no less pleased that she'd remembered. He wondered if the date was in one of her homework planners.

"Oh, I know, but we're talking now, and anyway, you might be busy tomorrow, who knows. I just wanted to make sure to say it before it was over."

"Busy?" Harry laughed. "I thought you said you knew what it was like here! I can't imagine any day here being busy."

"I know, but you just never know," said Hermione. "Better to do things sooner rather than later."

"Yeah, I think that homework planner you got me might have mentioned that once or twice," Harry said with a chuckle.

"Well, I'm just glad you're using it. That reminds me, that's another good reason for Hedwig to have shown up, I can send you your birthday present. I was going to send it by Muggle post—"

"No, not a good idea," Harry interrupted her. "Anything sent to me by Muggle post is going to be intercepted by my aunt and uncle, and probably thrown away, unless I happen to get to it first. Definitely use Hedwig. Anyway, at this point, she'll be annoyed with you if you don't."

"Yes, she seems to be looking at me suspiciously right now," agreed Hermione. "Unless it's my imagination."

"Probably not," Harry answered. "She's given me dirty looks plenty of times when she thought I wasn't treating her with the proper respect. Anyway, thanks for the gift, whatever it is. I'll be looking forward to it."

"Oh, it was nothing. So," and here her voice changed, as though they were now getting to the important part of the call, "have you gotten your O.W.L. results?"

Harry suddenly realized that, important as that was to most students, he hadn't given it a thought all summer. "No, I haven't. Are they late getting them out? I did think we'd have them by now."

"You really don't have yours? Strange, I'd have thought they would send them all out at once, but I got mine two days ago."

"Yes, that is strange," Harry agreed, but he was not really bothered. He was curious to know how he did, but was not burning with the need and desire to know, as he assumed Hermione would be. "So yours are all Outstanding, I expect?"

"No, they aren't," replied Hermione, sounding wounded. Harry's eyebrows shot straight up. "Nine Outstandings and one Exceeds Expectations."

Harry thought to make a comment regarding the fact that most students would be thrilled with such a result, but he knew Hermione better than that, not to mention that he could tell that she was deeply upset. He felt that he had better tread carefully. "Which one is the Exceeds Expectations?"

"Actually, Harry, I was wondering if you could guess which one it was."

Harry looked blank. How could he possibly know? He told her as much.

"Okay, let me put it this way," she pressed him. "Which exam had unusual conditions?" At Harry's silence, she continued, "During which exam was anything happening that could affect the students' concentration?"

Harry blinked in surprise. "History of Magic? But that happened at almost the end of the lesson. That shouldn't have--"

"No, no, not History of Magic," Hermione said, and Harry could tell that she was getting impatient, so he concentrated on his memories of all the tests. In a moment it came to him.

"Oh, Astronomy," he said, finally understanding.

"Yes, Astronomy," she confirmed. "Astronomy, during which there was a huge ruckus going on right in our field of vision, not to mention that a good friend of ours was being attacked. Really, we lost a good twenty minutes of that exam."

Harry understood that she was right, but he honestly couldn't get that worked up about it. He was not going to need an Astronomy O.W.L., so for himself he didn't care, but he knew this was not the right thing to say to Hermione. She needed him to be worked up on her behalf.

"Yes, we did. I wouldn't be at all surprised if I failed. It really isn't fair. Still, considering what happened, Exceeds Expectations is really good. I'll bet no one else in the group did that well."

This was obviously not quite the response she'd been hoping for. "Yes, you may be right, but that's not the point! We're supposed to have one hour for the exam! One uninterrupted hour! The school and the testers are supposed to give us proper testing conditions, and they didn't do that! It wasn't a fair test!"

"Yes, but all of us took the test under the same conditions, so it all comes out the same, doesn't it?"

Hermione sighed loudly, exasperated but trying to control her temper. "No, Harry, it's not like in Quidditch, where if it rains it doesn't matter because it rains on both sides. My Astronomy O.W.L. won't only be compared to yours and Ron's and everyone else's who took the test that night, but to everyone who took the test in past years and will in future years. They got the right conditions. We didn't."

Harry thought this over for a few seconds. "Yeah, I suppose you have a point," he agreed. "But what can we do? The test is done, we have our results. Well, you do, anyway."

"What we can do, Harry, is file a complaint with the O.W.L. testing board, and apply for a retest for anyone who took the test that night and wants it. I've already filed the initial complaint, and now I have to get a petition together, signed by all the students who want to take the test again. As I understand it, it doesn't exactly matter how many students sign; the decision will be made on the merits. Still, I'm really hoping that if most or all of us sign who were there that night, they'll be more likely to give us a retest. So, I know you don't have your results yet, but I was really hoping..."

"So, if you sign the petition, you commit to taking the test again, and if you do worse the second time..."

"...that's the result you're stuck with." With more than a hint of a plea in her voice, Hermione said, "If you want to wait to get your scores, I'll understand, but-"

Harry interrupted her. "No, it's okay. I'll sign it, no matter what my score is." He knew it was possible that his gesture could cost him an O.W.L., and would probably cost him some extra hours of study, but he'd come to realize that sometimes you did things for friends that you wouldn't normally do. He also knew that even if he ended up managing a pass, he couldn't look Hermione in the eye and protect his score by refusing to help her.

"Oh, thank you, Harry! Thank you so much!" she squealed from the other end of the phone. "This means a lot to me, and especially since you don't know your scores yet, it's really great of you to do this."

"I assume that you're going to be sending owls to everyone else who took the test when we did, and asking them to sign as well?" Harry wondered.

"Yes, I've already exchanged owls with Professor McGonagall, and she's agreed to let me come in to Hogwarts tomorrow to use the library to research precedent for my, for our complaint." Harry could tell how happy she was to have had someone join her cause. "I'm also going to use the Hogwarts owls to send letters to people who might be interested in signing. Of course, I'm afraid that the only people I'm going to get are those who have already failed the test and have nothing to lose. People who passed may not want to risk taking it again. Still, I'm hoping for the best."

Harry hesitated, then decided to say what was on his mind, what seemed obvious. "That's a good idea, but you know, Hermione, you know what some people are going to say... not that I would, of course... but-"

"Yes, I know. They're going to say that Hermione Granger, Little Miss Has To Get the Best Score on Everything, couldn't stand the tiniest blemish on her school record, and had to resort to any devious means to get the score she wanted, even though most everyone would be delighted with her results, it wasn't enough for her. You know what, Harry? I don't care! I'm right. This complaint is perfectly legitimate. The test wasn't fair. And it's not just ego-when you look for jobs, people are pretty impressed with ten Outstanding O.W.L.s, but they're less impressed with nine Outstandings and one Exceeds Expectations. What if I'm competing for a job with someone who had perfect scores?"

Hermione continued for a few more minutes, explaining the possible consequences in great detail, and commenting a few more times about the unfairness of the situation. She's really got a thing about this, Harry thought. She's even more worked up about this than she was about the house-elves. Finally she finished.

"I'm sorry, Harry, I know you don't care so much about this, it's just that it's so unfair, and I haven't had anyone to talk to about it, well, maybe my parents, but they don't understand exactly, they weren't there. Thanks a lot for listening."

"It's no problem, really. If I wasn't talking to you, I'd just be up in my room, killing time. I just hope everything works out okay."

"I hope so too," she agreed. "Can I ask you about something else? I wanted-"

"Are you still on that telephone?" Aunt Petunia was back in the room, looking at Harry angrily. "I've been waiting for two calls! I should have known you wouldn't have the common decency to-"

"All right, all right, just a minute," Harry said sullenly. He seriously doubted that she was waiting for any calls, but was surprised that he'd even been allowed to stay on this long. He said to Hermione, "I'm sorry, Hermione, but-"

"I know, I could hear her clearly at my end. That's not very nice. You know, I could send an owl to Professors Moody or Lupin."

"No, not for this. I'll let them know if I want them for anything." Petunia blanched, which had been Harry's intention. If she wasn't going to be nice, then he didn't have to be nice. "Thanks for calling, Hermione. See you soon, I hope." She said good-bye and they hung up.

Harry glanced at Petunia as if to ask her if she had more to say. He could tell she was furious at his implied threat, but she refused to look at him. She walked out of the room without a word.

The phone did not ring again all evening.

Harry was lying on his bed later that evening, a few hours after dinner, relaxing and thinking about the call with Hermione. It had been really good to talk to her; it made him remember all the more how much he missed the wizarding world when he wasn't there. Just a year and a day, he thought. In a year and a day I'll be seventeen and considered an adult in the wizarding world, and I can leave this place and never return. He knew, however, that living at the Dursleys', and at Hogwarts, ensured his safety, and he wondered how would he stay safe after that. He knew he was good at Defense Against the Dark Arts, but not nearly as good as Voldemort's Death Eaters, never mind Voldemort himself. Would the ability to Apparate keep him safe? He wished, for perhaps the hundredth time this summer, that Sirius were still around. He resolved to talk to Professors Lupin and Dumbledore about it.

Hedwig fluttered in through the window, carrying a package. Harry took it, thanked her, and opened it up. There was a book-shaped package and a card. He opened the card first, and recognized Hermione's handwriting.

"Happy Birthday, Harry! I know this might get to you the night before, and it's up to you whether you want to open it now or tomorrow. Partly I wanted to free up Hedwig in case she had other deliveries for you, and also to give you some new reading material. I really enjoyed the phone call. Thanks so much for your support. Love, Hermione."

Harry opened the package immediately. It was indeed a book. It was large, black, and very professional-looking. The plain cover read: "A Comprehensive Guide to Strategies for Teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts." Harry was puzzled; this was the kind of book used by Hogwarts teachers. It also looked like it had to have been fairly expensive. Why would Hermione send him a book like this? He opened it and another, smaller card fell out.

"I know you're probably wondering why I'd send you this book. After all, you did very well teaching us last year without it." Harry had to smile; she was right about his wondering, but wrong about the reason. "But I'm really hoping we can do the D.A. again this year, or something like it. I know, we should have a proper

Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher this year, but the D.A. gives lots of chances for practice and study that we wouldn't get in class, and also flexibility-we can study what we want. If we do it again, the book could come in very handy. I hope you'll think about it, and think of the book as my way of saying thanks for all you did for us last year."

Harry hadn't given much thought to whether the D.A. would continue in their sixth year. He had assumed there wouldn't be that much of a need for it, but what if Professor Dumbledore again couldn't find anyone willing to take the job, and had to give it to some incompetent? Harry realized that he might be able to make good use of the book after all.

He spent the next two hours looking through it, both reading and skimming. Now that he had some experience teaching, he could appreciate the value of the ideas in the book. He couldn't help thinking that if he'd had the book last year with the D.A., he could've done a really good job. He finally put it down, having already planned the better part of six lessons for the D.A., if it was to be revived.

His thoughts drifted to how pleased Sirius had been about the D.A., and then to the books he'd borrowed from the library. He got one of them out and started reading. He read about ten pages before he fell asleep.

The next thing Harry knew, it was daylight and a small, brown owl was hopping up and down on him, hooting with pleasure and jostling the package attached to its leg. Harry knew it had to be from Ron, as Pigwidgeon was Ron's owl. It was a small package, and after Harry untied it from Pig's leg and thanked him, the owl flew up to get a drink and a snack from Hedwig's cage, as Hedwig eyed him warily.

Harry opened the package to find a blue, rubbery... thing, he couldn't even vaguely tell what it was supposed to be, or do. He looked at the note that had been attached.

"Harry-in case you don't know what this is, it's an Omni-view. It goes with omnioculars, the ones we got at the Quidditch World Cup. You fold it in a certain way around the omnioculars-there's directions on the other side of this note-and when you look into the omnioculars, you see images that have been magically put into the Omni-view. This one is titled, 'Ten Years of Quidditch Highlights,' and it has the most exciting events in recent Quidditch. There are some goalkeeping moves I want to try out with you this year. Happy Birthday!-Ron."

Harry dug out his omnioculars from his trunk and tried to follow the directions to wrap the Omni-view around the omnioculars, but it was not easy. Fifteen minutes later, he was beginning to think it required more dexterity than it was worth, but he finally got it on. He looked into the viewer and saw a menu, and basic instructions on

how to get to each year and event by using the omnioculars' controls. He had just watched a few seconds of action when he heard more wings fluttering.

Through the window flew two brown owls Harry had never seen before, carrying between them a medium-sized white box. Quickly untying the burden from the owls, Harry opened the box to find a delicious-looking pumpkin cake on which was written in white frosting: Happy Birthday, the Weasleys. He knew it had to be from Mrs. Weasley, and he appreciated her thoughtfulness. She knew he wasn't fed so well at the Dursleys', and while this summer had been better than most, a cake like this was quite a luxury. Harry broke off a piece and started in. I won't have to go down and try to scrounge some breakfast now, he thought.

Halfway through the piece of cake, Harry's attention went back to the Omniview. As he was thinking about picking it up, another owl came through the window, bearing just a letter. Harry glanced up at Hedwig's cage; including Hedwig, there would soon be five owls there if one of the recent arrivals did not leave soon, and Harry wondered how Hedwig would react to this mass intrusion.

The letter was from Hagrid, wishing Harry a happy birthday and suggesting that Harry should drop by Hagrid's place as soon as possible. Harry was very confused; how was he going to get the chance to see Hagrid anytime soon? Did Hagrid mean soon after he got back to Hogwarts? He always visited Hagrid as soon as he could, Hagrid knew that.

Harry hardly had time to puzzle over this further, as within seconds of one another, two more owls came zooming in. One carried a letter, the other, a small box. No sooner had Harry untied the owls' burdens than Hedwig, apparently having had enough, started screeching very loudly and flying around the room. This caused all the other owls to take flight, and for a second, seven owls were flying inside Harry's room. Just at that moment, alerted by the screeching, Petunia came rushing into the room.

"WHAT IS GOING ON IN HERE??" Petunia screamed. "Get those... things out of here this instant! Do you think this is a farm?"

As Petunia continued her rant, the owls made their way to the window one by one, and finally only Hedwig remained. Petunia was saying, "We've been very, very tolerant of you this summer, and you decide to have an owl party in here? This is totally unacceptable behavior, and it will not be tolerated! Our patience with you is over! You will stay in this room for the next two weeks, coming out only to use the bathroom, and your window will be nailed shut when your uncle gets home! That's it! That's enough!" With that, she left the room, slamming the door after her.

There had not been any chance for Harry to explain, or say anything, but he reflected that it was just as well. Petunia would no doubt have not been interested in

hearing anything he had to say, and talking back would just have made her madder. He was actually not that bothered; the Dursleys' home felt like a prison to him even when he had freedom of movement, so being confined to his room just made it a smaller prison. He wondered why Petunia had lost her temper so badly; he thought maybe she'd been looking for an excuse to scream at him ever since that day at the train station. She hated to be told what to do by anyone, much less a group of what she considered freaks.

Harry turned his attention to the two latest arrivals. First the box, which contained a pair of what Harry recognized to be Extendable Ears, an invention of Fred and George's, which allowed the user to listen in on nearby conversations. Included were three earpieces and a note: "Dear Harry, Please use them well. You probably won't care to listen in on the Muggles, but you never know. We're sure you can figure out why we sent extra earpieces. If you can, come by the shop before the term starts-Fred and George."

Of course, Harry knew the reason for the extras; so Ron and Hermione could listen as well, since the three of them were so often together. "Not going to be seeing you anytime soon, anyway," he said to himself. He wondered if the Ears would come in handy much at Hogwarts. They certainly wouldn't here, not unless he wanted to listen to Uncle Vernon boast about his latest business triumphs or complain about the rising number of immigrants.

The newest letter was very short; it said simply, "Harry-be ready to leave at 1:00. Not your trunk or your things, just you. See you soon. Remus." Harry excitedly looked at his clock; the time was 12:15. What was going to happen when Lupin showed up and Petunia refused to let him leave? Would she dare? And why was Lupin picking Harry up? Where were they going? Harry ran through a dozen possible scenarios, but none made sense. The only times anyone had come to see him at Privet Drive had been when they came to take him away for the summer, but that was clearly not going to happen today. Well, Harry thought, at least he wouldn't have to wait long to find out.

At 12:30, the phone rang. Harry grabbed the Extendable Ears and slipped them under the door, in the direction of the stairs. He put in the earpiece just as Petunia was answering the phone.

"Hello? No, he isn't. No, I don't know when he'll be back. Goodbye."

It was easy for Harry to tell from her abrupt manner that the call had been for him. He cursed silently; he very much wanted to talk to whoever it was, even if he had to leave in less than half an hour.

The minutes ticked away slowly as Harry occupied himself with looking at his presents some more and having another piece of cake. Finally, it was 1:00, and right

on time, the doorbell rang. Harry already had the Extendable Ears deployed; he could hear clearly but see nothing.

Petunia answered the door. "Hello, can I help you?" she asked politely.

"Yes, thank you, my name is Remus Lupin. I need to talk to Harry Potter, please."

"I'm sorry, but Harry's not home right now." Petunia's voice was still polite, so Harry guessed that Lupin must have been dressed as a Muggle; Petunia probably didn't recognize him from King's Cross, and still didn't know who she was dealing with. Harry was prepared to yell out the window if he had to, but he wanted to know what would happen first. He continued to listen.

"I'm sorry, but I happen to know that he is home. He's in his bedroom. I need to talk to him, please." Lupin kept his pleasant tone, but Petunia was quickly losing hers.

"I don't care to be contradicted by strangers who show up at my front door. Now, please go." From Petunia's tone and Remus's specific knowledge of where he was, Harry gathered that Petunia now understood that she was talking to a wizard.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Dursley, but not without Harry."

"The fact is, he's not going anywhere. He is confined to his room, and he will not leave for two weeks. You can come back then."

"This can't wait, Mrs. Dursley. For what reason is he confined?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but I came up to his room and there were a dozen... owls flying around screeching their heads off. I won't have that in this house."

"Ah, yes. Are you aware, Mrs. Dursley, that today is Harry's birthday?"

"What of it?" Petunia shot back. "Do you think we're not going to punish him for misbehavior just because it's his birthday?"

"No, but there was no misbehavior. You see, because it was his birthday, he received many owls from friends with birthday wishes and gifts. People being creatures of habit, they tend to send their owls in the morning, so if you receive a lot of mail, chances are it will come at the same time, leading to there being a number of owls in the same place at the same time. Now, owls are very territorial, and they will tolerate only so many intruders before they shriek, make a racket, and try to make the others go away."

"I'm sure this is fascinating, but if I want information about the territoriality of owls, I'll turn on the BBC and watch a nature show."

"My point is," Lupin continued patiently, "that Harry was not responsible for what happened, and there was nothing he could have done to prevent it. Understanding this will, I imagine, cause you to choose to rescind your punishment."

"You imagine wrong. He should not be receiving post from owls at all. If they want to keep him out of trouble, his friends can send him things by normal post. Now, please leave before I call the police."

"You can do that, Mrs. Dursley, but we have Memory Charms for a reason. Now, I am asking politely and for the last time. Please call Harry to the door."

"For the last time? And what do you plan to do? You can't hurt me, I know, there are rules about that sort of thing."

"Yes, indeed, I cannot hurt you, or use magic on you, nor do I have any intention of doing so. There are things I can do, however, that are within the rules."

A second later, Harry heard a strangled cry from Petunia, followed by her screaming, "Potter! Get down here, this instant!"

Harry quickly gathered up the Extendable Ears, threw them in the trunk (having already stowed his birthday items) and locked it, and ran down the stairs, double-checking for his wand in his back pocket. He saw a shaking Petunia and a pleasant-looking Remus Lupin, so Muggle-like in a business suit that Harry would have had a hard time recognizing him. But what got his attention the same instant was the lawn, which could be seen through the open front door.

The lawn was red, but changing color before Harry's eyes. It was orange, then yellow, then green, then blue... Harry realized it was cycling through the colors of the rainbow. He couldn't help but smile as he realized that Lupin, who must have known how inordinately proud the Dursleys were of their immaculately kept lawn, had chosen a harmless yet exquisitely painful way to remind Petunia that cooperation was her best course. Harry also knew that she would be terrified that the neighbors would see, and ask awkward questions.

"All right, here he is, now stop it!" yelled Petunia; Harry blinked, and the lawn was its normal hue of green again, as if nothing had happened.

Remus looked at Petunia seriously but politely. "Mrs. Dursley, I feel I need to emphasize, if I haven't already, that what we said at the train station was not a joke. If you don't like Harry, if you don't want to treat him as you would a family member, we can't stop you. But you will not treat him badly on purpose, and you will not punish him for things he can't control. Most of us fight against anti-Muggle prejudice, but we don't respond well to anti-wizard prejudice, either. If you don't like wizards, don't take it out on Harry. He can't help what he is. Finally, please take this seriously. It was fortunate for you that it was I, and not Mad-Eye," and Harry could tell from Petunia's expression that she knew who he meant, "who came here to get Harry. I don't know what he would have done, but I'm sure it would have been less... subtle. Good day, Mrs. Dursley. Please come with me, Harry."

As they walked away, Harry didn't know quite what to say; he kept looking up at Lupin and looking back over his shoulder at the lawn. Finally, he said, "I'm sorry you had to deal with that. I should have just run downstairs when I heard it was you."

Lupin answered, "No, it's better that you didn't, you'd just have been in more trouble when you got back." He paused. "I had some idea of what your home life was like, but experiencing it is different. I understand why you're so keen to get out of there every summer. You have quite a cross to bear."

"You have one too," Harry replied, referring to the fact that Lupin involuntarily became a werewolf on the night of the full moon every month. "At least I get to leave mine behind when I reach seventeen. You're stuck with yours."

"True. We all have them to some extent or another. So, I gather you welcome the opportunity to get out for part of a day?"

"You bet," Harry said, grinning. He also thought, but did not say, that he was very happy to see Lupin in particular, who had always been very kind to him. "But why did you come? What's going on? I have a feeling you're not just taking me out to the carnival for the day."

Lupin smiled. "No, but that sounds like fun. We should do that sometime. But you're right, this has to do with Hogwarts. That's where we're going."

"Really?" Harry asked. He had never been to Hogwarts in the summer; the idea seemed strange. "How? Why?"

"Two very reasonable questions. To answer the first, we'll be taking a Portkey. As for the second, there are things that Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall want to talk to you about. I know your next question will be 'what things are those?' but you'll have to wait to talk to them to find out. I'll just say that it's nothing bad, you're not in any trouble."

"How did you know that I was thinking that?"

Lupin smiled again. "I believe that any youngster, no matter how well-behaved, being taken to see an authority figure will at least entertain the notion that he or she may be in trouble. We start thinking of things we might have done. You may be able to imagine how it was for me as a child; I was not always completely aware of what I had done, so I could entertain any fear, no matter how outlandish. Ah, here we are."

Harry looked up—he had not been paying much attention to where they were going—and saw the familiar home of Arabella Figg. As they walked up the path to the door, cats scattered, except for one who followed them and meowed as if in welcome.

Mrs. Figg was waiting at the door. "Why, hello, Remus, good to see you again. And you, Harry." They said hello, and walked in; Harry started looking around to see

if he could tell what the Portkey would be. "Would you like a nice cup of tea before you're off?"

"Thank you, Arabella, but no, they're expecting Harry any time now. We really should be going."

"All right, then," she said agreeably. "Have a lovely time."

Lupin walked over to the coffee table in the living room. As Harry followed, Lupin gestured to a half-scale wooden sculpture of a cat. "Ready?" he asked. Harry nodded. Lupin took Harry's hand to make sure they touched it at the same time, and they did.

Chapter 2

A Summer's Day At Hogwarts

After a few disorienting seconds, they were in Professor Dumbledore's office, standing across from his desk. Dumbledore was standing near the door to his office, seeing someone off. "Thank you, Sybil. Have a pleasant day," he said. He closed the door. He looked at Harry and Lupin. "I'm very sorry, my meeting with Professor Trelawney seems to have run long. Please allow me to store some thoughts, and I'll be with you in a moment."

Harry watched as Dumbledore opened a drawer in his desk. Harry could not see from the other side of the desk what was in it, but that immediately became clear. Dumbledore raised his wand to his temple, appeared to extract some silvery threads, and transferred them into the Pensieve that Harry knew was in the drawer. Dumbledore closed the drawer and looked up. "Harry, Remus, good to see you both. Remus, thank you for getting Harry. I hope there was no trouble."

"A little," Lupin answered, and Harry got the feeling from Lupin's expression that he would rather not have had to embarrass Petunia in order to secure Harry's release. "It's been quite a while since I've met any Muggles who are that antagonistic towards wizards. I rather admire that Harry manages not to blow up a family member every summer."

Harry made a noise that was between a grunt and a chuckle. "It's not easy sometimes. If I could be charged for all the magic I've thought of doing to them, I'd be doing life in Azkaban. But it hasn't been so bad this summer, thanks to you," he said, addressing Lupin.

To Dumbledore's slightly raised eyebrows, Lupin briefly summarized the meeting he and the others had had with the Dursleys a month ago. "Well, diplomacy has never been Alastor's strong suit," commented Dumbledore, in what he clearly

knew to be humorous understatement. I'm glad it's not, Harry thought. Nothing but fear would have made them lay off me this summer.

"Well, I'll leave you two to talk, then," Lupin said. After Dumbledore thanked him again, Lupin headed for the door. When he got there, he stopped, turned, and looked at Harry. "You know, Harry, you should feel free to send me an owl if you have any questions about anything, or just want to talk, especially in the summer. Just so you know." Harry just nodded; Lupin turned and left.

"A very good man, Remus," Dumbledore mused. "A pity he couldn't have remained Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. He would have filled the bill very nicely."

"That's for sure," Harry agreed. He felt a small burst of anger at Professor Snape, whose disclosure of the information that Lupin was a werewolf forced Lupin to resign his position at the end of Harry's third year at Hogwarts. "He was the only one in my time here who knew what he was doing." Then it suddenly dawned on Harry that his comment could be taken as a criticism of Dumbledore, who hired all but one of those teachers. "Sir, I didn't mean-"

Dumbledore chuckled lightly. "That's quite all right, Harry. Actually, Barty Crouch knew what he was doing, much to my regret. But I take your point. Actually, I'm optimistic that the situation might improve this year."

Harry's eyes widened slightly. "You mean you've found someone good who's willing to take the job?"

"The former, yes; the latter, that has yet to be determined. Tell me, Harry, have you heard any rumors to the effect that there is a jinx on that position?" Harry nodded. "Do you believe that is true?"

Harry thought for a few seconds, and answered, "It's true that bad stuff has happened to the teacher of that course all five years I've been here. But I really don't believe in jinxes, at least the non-magical kind. So I'd have to say no. Also, I've been involved in some way with what happened to each of those teachers. So, who knows, maybe the jinx will end when I graduate from Hogwarts."

"Well, I do not think that will be necessary, but I am glad you do not take it seriously. Now, Harry, the reason I wanted to talk to you today-"

"Professor? I'm sorry to interrupt, but I wanted to say something first." Dumbledore nodded attentively. "I wanted to say that I'm sorry-" Dumbledore shook his head slightly, but allowed Harry to continue-"about how I acted in here last month. I just couldn't control myself."

"I don't think anyone in your position could have, Harry," said Dumbledore gently. "It was simply too much to process. It takes time. But the last thing in the world you need to do is apologize. Remember, I made you stay in the room. You

wanted to go, but I wouldn't let you out. It was partly because I needed to tell you about the prophecy, but partly because you needed to let go of some of your immediate pain and grief. I did feel responsible for what happened, so it seemed only right that I should absorb the initial burst. You have nothing to apologize for. If it is because I am the headmaster and you are a student, well, at that point I felt that we were just two people."

Harry nodded, feeling grateful for Dumbledore's forgiveness. "Maybe it's partly that, but it's also that... well, I have a lot of respect for you, and..." He trailed off, but he could see his meaning was clear to Dumbledore.

"I understand, Harry, and I appreciate that. But context matters in everything, not least of all here. I might react differently if you lost your temper with me for no good reason, out of contempt or indifference. But frankly, I would have been more worried about you if you had managed to keep your temper in that situation. As I said, it was just too much, and I know that your regard for me did not enter into it. But we are all human, and thank goodness for that. We cannot truly grieve for those who we did not love."

"By that reckoning, Voldemort isn't that much human, is he?" Harry observed.

Dumbledore considered this. "From this viewpoint, I suppose not. I am sure that he is no longer capable of feelings such as love, or even affection. People to him are tools to be used, instruments of control and power. Whether they are his enemies or his devoted followers, he judges them by how well he can make use of them. No more, no less."

Harry frowned in puzzlement. "But how did he get like that? Was he just born that way? Why would anyone want to be that way?"

"Your last question is the easiest to answer, so I will take that one first. He rejects love, affection and friendship because he considers them weaknesses. If you love someone, they can hurt you, with words, rejection, or their illness or death. It is a vulnerability." Seeing Harry raise his eyebrows, Dumbledore continued, "Strictly speaking, this is true. Consider your case and you may see what I mean. Last year, you and one of the Weasley twins attacked Draco Malfoy after a Quidditch match. What was it he said that prompted you to attack him?"

"He was saying foul, horrible things about the Weasleys, especially Mrs. Weasley," Harry answered, the memory stirring up feelings of anger.

"He wanted you to attack him," Dumbledore observed. "He knew that with Dolores Umbridge having the power to mete out punishments, you would be sure to be penalized very disproportionately. He could not defeat you on the Quidditch pitch, so he wanted to hurt you in some other way, and he succeeded. One of your vulnerabilities, in his eyes, was your deep affection for the Weasley family. Now,

bear in mind, I do not consider this a true vulnerability; the rewards we gain from such bonds far outweigh the disadvantages. I meant only that it is so for one such as Voldemort, for whom power is the only thing that matters."

"You said 'one of your vulnerabilities,'" Harry pointed out. "What were the others?"

"I was thinking of only one other, and that is your failure to recognize that such words from him or anyone mean nothing. If what he says matters to you, he has power over you. That is why he does it. You know what he says is not true. You must simply ignore it. That will take away his power."

"How can I just stand there and let him say terrible things about Mrs. Weasley?" Harry demanded. She especially had been so good to him, he couldn't imagine how he could listen to such things about her and say nothing.

"By reminding yourself that they are only words and mean nothing. We give credence to the words of others based on our respect for them, their knowledge, and their character. If you know someone is simply attempting to goad you, you can safely discount anything they say. If you wish, you may take satisfaction in knowing that by failing to respond as they wish, you are frustrating their efforts."

Harry pondered this. "Yeah, I guess you're right. It's really hard, though. I have gotten to where him insulting just me doesn't bother me... I should talk to Ron about this; he's always losing it with Malfoy. Hermione, on the other hand, seems to know this already. She never gives him the satisfaction of knowing if he's got to her. Maybe I can ask her how she does it, give me some advice."

Dumbledore nodded. "An excellent idea, and one of the many benefits of close associations; we can help each other in areas in which we need it. But to get back to your question about how Voldemort became as he is today, that is a psychological and perhaps metaphysical question. Environment and early experiences undoubtedly have some influence-as Tom Riddle, he was abandoned by his father and raised in a Muggle orphanage-but many people, including yourself, rose from trying circumstances and became fine people. I cannot say when he gave up on the idea of love and friendship. When people are psychologically wounded, they may cling to hope or give in to despair. No one can know what causes one or the other, the human mind being as complex and mysterious as it is. All we can know about Voldemort is that he is the combination of a crippled psyche and tremendous magical power. It is not at all difficult to feel sorry for him."

Harry was stunned. "Feel sorry for him? Look at all the people he's killed, tortured, maimed, you name it!"

"Yes, and that is exactly why I feel sorry for him," Dumbledore explained. "One of the great but not well understood truths of life is that what we do to

another, we do to ourselves. Voldemort has done all this to himself as well, but he cannot feel it because he has rid himself of that which made him human. That is why I feel sorry for him. By that I mean that I pity him, not that I sympathize with him. I sympathize with his victims and their loved ones. I pity him. It is as if he has been taken over by evil, and the human personality which once resided within him is gone. That is a great loss."

It was a hard thing for Harry to understand. Voldemort had killed his parents, along with many others, and caused untold suffering. Harry couldn't easily accept the idea that Voldemort could be thought of with the kind of thoughtfulness and empathy that Dumbledore was showing.

Harry suddenly realized that they were talking about Voldemort in a way that Dumbledore never would have the previous year, when he avoided Harry in an effort to protect him from Voldemort intruding into Harry's mind. "Professor, I just thought of something... last year, you were so worried about Voldemort possessing me that you wouldn't even look at me. Now, you don't seem to be worried. What's changed?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Actually, that was one of the things I wished to talk to you about. There is still a concern, and it is still highly advisable for you to learn Occlumency. However-" Dumbledore paused, seeing a look of alarm on Harry's face, and knowing what it meant-"Professor Snape will not be the one instructing you."

The relief crossing Harry's features was equally palpable. Harry wanted to thank Dumbledore profusely, but stopped himself, knowing that Dumbledore would not approve of the implied criticism of Snape. Instead, he asked, "Who will be teaching me, then?"

"I will," Dumbledore said simply.

Even if he had wanted to, Harry could not have stopped the look of surprise and elation on his face. "Really? That's great! But... isn't this what you were worried about last year? That Voldemort would see me as an opportunity to get to you?"

"The situation is now different. Voldemort knew he would have only one opportunity to use the connection between you and he to deceive you into thinking that what you saw was real. He has used it; he will not try to do so again. It is still possible that he could try to possess you to try to reach me, but I have realized that that possibility must be confronted head-on, not avoided. It is not practical that I avoid being in your presence indefinitely. Instead, I will teach you Occlumency, and I will give you advice to help you fight him off should he attempt to enter your mind."

"How can I do that?" Harry asked. "How can I possibly get him out of there once he's in there? I'm not strong enough to do that."

Dumbledore smiled. "In fact, you are, Harry. You simply have to do deliberately what you did last month. When he possessed you briefly in the Ministry of Magic, what did you feel?"

Harry shuddered. "It was horrible. I felt surrounded, isolated, like I was in the grip of evil... which I suppose I was, come to think of it. Even worse than when a dementor is close by. I thought I would just as soon die than have that continue."

"But then you had a different thought. What was it?"

Harry looked at Dumbledore in surprise. How could he possibly know that? He preferred not to say, but sensed that it was important, and understood that he could trust Dumbledore. He slowly said, "I thought, at least I would be with Sirius again."

"And you experienced a strong feeling of affection for him, is that right?" Harry nodded. "You see, Harry, that is it right there. The love you felt for Sirius was what drove Voldemort away. He could not, he cannot, deal with it. He cannot share his thoughts with someone who loves, who feels love in his presence. It is anathema to him. Your next question may be 'why,' I would like you to see if you can work that out."

Harry thought for a minute; recalling what Dumbledore had said earlier, and said uncertainly, "Because love weakens him?" still not understanding quite why.

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, Harry. Even more than that, it practically debilitates him. As I said before, all he knows is evil and power. He finds it easy to forget that such a thing as love exists. Experiencing love is a direct reminder of what he has become. It stirs the long-forgotten remnants of his conscience, his humanity. This he cannot allow. If he did, his entire existence as he knows it now would be called into question."

"You mean, he could die?" Harry was amazed at the thought.

"No one can say what would happen, because he would never permit it. He may well think twice about trying to enter your mind again, because of what happened. But if he should try, you have the means to drive him out."

Still not quite understanding what he was being asked to do, he said, "You mean, I should think about love?"

"No, Harry," Dumbledore answered seriously. "You should feel love. There are similarities to how you summon a Patronus. When you summon a Patronus, you think of a happy memory so that you will feel happy; it drives away dementors because they are the living antithesis of happiness. In this case, you think of something that causes you to feel love, as Voldemort is the living antithesis of love. The more powerful feeling of love you can summon, the more effective it will be."

How am I supposed to do that? wondered Harry. Love was a concept that he had never discussed. He knew that some people said 'I love you' to each other, but it

had never been said to him. It all seemed so unfamiliar. Feeling foolish for having to ask, but knowing it was important, Harry asked, "Umm... how do I know if I love something or just like it a lot? What's the difference?"

Dumbledore looked with great sympathy across his desk at the boy who had never known a parent's love. "It may be best not to focus overmuch on the word 'love,'" he advised. "It is merely a placeholder for a feeling, the most powerful feeling known to man. Focus on that which warms your heart, people who care for and value you, feelings of friendship and closeness."

That made things somewhat clearer to Harry; he felt he could do that. He nodded slowly and said, "I understand."

"Good," said Dumbledore. "We will be talking about this more in the future, as it is not unrelated to Occlumency."

"What?" Harry blurted out. "Professor Snape certainly never said anything about love when he was teaching me Occlumency. He just said to clear my mind."

"Yes, and the mental skills used to focus on a specific thought or feeling are similar to those used to clear one's mind. You will see this as we proceed."

Harry nodded, feeling happy that at least he wouldn't be dreading Occlumency lessons as he had before. "So, we will be starting when the term starts?"

"No, I thought we would begin next week, if you do not have any other pressing engagements. Next Monday, perhaps?"

"Next Monday?" Harry gaped. He did not necessarily object, but it seemed strange to think of coming to Hogwarts regularly in the summer. "Well.... sure... of course I don't have any plans, I'm just kind of surprised. But yes, that's fine."

"Excellent," Dumbledore said. "I will see you next Monday at 1:00 p.m.; you should come the same way you did today. Now, there is something else I wished to discuss with you. It concerns Dumbledore's Army." He smiled, and Harry saw that familiar twinkle in his eyes. "The name does have a certain ring to it, doesn't it?"

Harry grinned, happy to see Dumbledore joking about it, considering all the trouble it ended up causing the previous year. "The name was Ginny's idea, actually," he said, wanting to give credit where it was due.

"Indeed? I shall have to mention that to her the next time I see her. The name was fortuitous, as it allowed me to take responsibility when Cornelius discovered it. It would have been very bad indeed if you had been expelled. In any case, I would like you to tell me about it."

Harry spent the next few minutes telling Dumbledore the story of how the group came to be, and about the lessons. "I didn't really feel like I was teaching so much as leading a practice group," Harry concluded. "I was worried about doing it at first, but now I'm really glad I did. It helped keep me going through the bad times

last year, especially after I got thrown off the Quidditch team. The others were pretty enthusiastic about it, too. I was really pleased with how everyone improved. Everyone tried really hard."

"Indeed, it does seem that you have much to be proud of. It takes courage to be the focal point of such an enterprise, though of course you have shown no shortage of that in your time here." Harry glanced down, embarrassed. "Now, I believe you have not yet received your O.W.L. results; Professor McGonagall has them and will be discussing them with you later, after we are finished here. But I will mention one of them here, now. I imagine that you would not be surprised to learn that you achieved an Outstanding score in your Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L."

Harry had hoped for, and privately expected, such a score, but had been reluctant to say it or think about it much, lest he be disappointed. "Yeah, I guess I'm not too surprised. I knew I did well. But I'm still really glad to hear it."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, I have been told by Mr. Tofty, who conducted your exam, that he has rarely, if ever, seen such a proficient performance. Now, normally we do not discuss exam results with anyone other than the student involved, but I am making an exception in this case. Would it surprise you to learn, Harry, that all of the fifth years in Dumbledore's Army scored Outstanding O.W.L.s in this subject?"

Harry's mouth dropped open, indicating the depth of his surprise. "Really? All of them? Wow... that's great! Well, like I said, everyone was really keen. It's easier to do well when it's something you really want to do. It's probably why I do so badly in Potions."

"No doubt you are correct when you point out that those studying with you were highly motivated, but I very much doubt that your fellow students would have done so uniformly well unless you had some skill as a teacher. You may take my word for it; I daresay I have some experience in the matter, being as I am a school headmaster."

"I guess I shouldn't argue with you, then," Harry reluctantly allowed. "Does this mean you want the D.A. to be a regular thing? Because it seemed to me that we wouldn't need it if we had a proper Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, would we? I mean, we only started the D.A. because Umbridge just wasn't teaching us at all."

Dumbledore looked at Harry, a serious expression on his face. "You have a good point, Harry, and it is my hope that we will have, as you say, a proper Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher this year. I know I am asking a lot, but I would like you to be the Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor."

Harry gazed at Dumbledore in a kind of fog. Surely he could not have heard what he thought he heard. How could he be a teacher when he was still a student? It was inconceivable. He shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Professor, I must have heard you wrong. I thought you said-"

"You were correct, Harry," Dumbledore said patiently. "I would like you to be the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

"Me? Be a teacher?" Harry was flabbergasted. "I'm just a student. Who would listen to me?"

"Why, those who wish to get an Outstanding score on their O.W.L., for a start," said Dumbledore with amusement. "Everyone found out about the D.A. when Dolores Umbridge discovered what you were doing last year and stopped it; so they know that you have been a teacher, even though in an unofficial capacity. I know for a fact that those in the group have been telling their friends and families what a positive experience it was for them. When people find out about the group's O.W.L. scores, and they will, it will seem perfectly natural for you to be teaching the class. Results matter. Now, will there be people who will not welcome this? Undoubtedly, some will say that no student, no matter how good a teacher, should teach while a student; some will say that I resorted to you because I could find no one better due to the so-called jinx, and some will say that you were offered the job because you are the famous Harry Potter. Such will always be the case; as I told Hagrid once, not a week has gone by in my time as headmaster that I have not been criticized for how I run the school. But the fact is, you are right for this position. I would not be making this request if that were not the case, believe me."

Harry was still stunned, but was also starting to feel trapped; he didn't think he could say no to Dumbledore, even for something like this. "I don't know... it's all so much..."

"I can understand why you might be intimidated by the idea," Dumbledore admitted. "It is true that this would be a Hogwarts first, but that does not mean that it is not a good idea. Perhaps you are not quite aware of how your lessons affected the others. I recently received a letter from Neville Longbottom's grandmother. I have her permission to show it to you; I would like you to read it."

Harry uncertainly took the letter Dumbledore handed him, and began reading silently:

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

I wished to write to make you aware of the great change Neville has undergone this past year; you may not have noticed, having to flee the school as you did. He is

virtually a different boy; more active, confident, and outgoing than he has ever been before. He has told me repeatedly, with great enthusiasm, about what a positive experience studying in Harry Potter's group was. I do not know if that is the sole reason for his change, but I know it must be at least a large part of it. He insisted on accompanying Harry and his friends on their mission to the Department of Mysteries, which I'm certain he would never have done before. Although it was a great risk, I am proud that he had the courage and determination to do such a thing. I certainly hope that you will encourage the continuation of the group next year, now that you are back and hopefully free of Ministry interference. Also, I know you will be needing a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher next year. You could do much worse than to give Harry the job; in fact, you have done so in the recent past. I spent much of last year persuading those I know that you are not as feeble and addle-brained as the Daily Prophet has suggested. Please do not make a liar of me.

Sincerely,
Esmerelda Longbottom

Harry still felt stunned. He knew Neville's grandmother to be an intimidating woman, not easily impressed.

Dumbledore appeared to have been thinking along the same lines. "Have you met Mrs. Longbottom, Harry?"

"Yes, last Christmas, at St. Mungo's. When we went to see Mr. Weasley, she and Neville were visiting Neville's parents."

"Ah, yes. Well, you know then that she is a woman to be taken seriously. And she was not the only one to express such a view. Now, I understand the idea may be rather startling to you, but you taught a class of twenty-five students last year, and very successfully. Being the official teacher is not that different, except that your age makes it unprecedented."

Harry grinned nervously. "Isn't that like saying that Everest isn't that hard to climb, except that it's 29,000 feet high?"

Dumbledore chuckled gently. "It is not quite the same thing, but I take your point. I gather that because of your age, you are worried about being taken seriously by the students in your classes?" Harry nodded. "Well," Dumbledore continued, "you may wish to consider that in this situation, being 'the famous Harry Potter' is helpful. Like it or not, Harry, you are an icon, a symbol of defiance of Voldemort. People who might dismiss you because of your age will accept you because of that, as well as your reputation as leader of the D.A."

"Not the Slytherins," Harry said darkly. "They'll be competing with each other to see who can disrupt my classes the best. Malfoy'll have them in open rebellion. There's no way they'll accept me."

"They are students at this school, and they will behave properly in their classes or face the consequences," Dumbledore said firmly. "While teaching, you will have all the authority of any Hogwarts teacher, with the power to take points from offenders' Houses and give detentions. I know that you will not abuse this power; if anything, I am concerned that you may be too slow to use it. You must be tolerant to a point, but not tolerate deliberate disrespect. I believe you will be able to draw the line at an appropriate place."

Harry fervently hoped that Dumbledore was right; he supposed that even Slytherins didn't want to do detentions any more than they had to. Still, there was Malfoy...

"What about Malfoy, Professor? I'll have to give him detentions every class, because he'll never stop challenging me. He hates me so bad that he won't care. Of course, I'd rather not teach him anyway; he's just going to run off and join the Death Eaters after he graduates."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "Who can say, Harry? You may be right, but he may surprise us. One never knows what the future will bring, and we should always hold out hope for positive outcomes. In any case, you will be spared that particular problem. You will not be teaching the N.E.W.T. classes, for sixth and seventh years; it would not be fair to you to ask you to teach classes you have never taken yourself. If you agree to accept the position, you will teach first through fifth years. I will assume the responsibility of teaching the N.E.W.T. classes, which you will be taking as well."

Harry stared at Dumbledore. He was going to have the chance to study advanced Defense Against the Dark Arts from the world's greatest living wizard? Harry felt ecstatic, then had a sudden realization—he would have this great opportunity only if he accepted the teaching position. If he refused, Dumbledore would be forced to hire an adult, who would teach all Defense Against the Dark Arts classes, including N.E.W.T. classes. Suddenly, teaching looked a lot more appealing.

"Wow..." Harry was speechless for a few moments. "Of course, it'd be terrific to study with you... but how will I have time for everything? A full study schedule is hard enough, but with teaching..." Harry couldn't imagine how he could do it.

"Yes, we will have to make certain allowances, and I do not promise that it will be easy," Dumbledore admitted. "But, as you know, all Hogwarts students of third year and above are required to take a minimum of eight classes; you will be allowed to take as few as five. You will be allowed to drop History of Magic and Divination, and

to choose between Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures. If you still wish to possibly become an Auror in the future, you will want to continue with Defense Against the Dark Arts, Charms, Potions, and Transfigurations. In whatever case, you can work out your schedule with Professor McGonagall after we have finished up here. Even with three fewer classes than last year, it will not be easy, but it should be manageable."

Harry welcomed the idea of taking fewer classes, but he thought he saw a problem with this arrangement. "What if I'm teaching a class at the same time as I'm supposed to be in another one?"

"Yes, that is a potential problem," Dumbledore agreed, "and it is one reason that I am asking you well in advance of the school year. If you agree to teach the class, the schedule must be arranged so as to avoid this. It can be done, of course." He paused, regarded Harry, and asked, "Are there any more objections you can think of?"

Sure that Dumbledore was teasing him, Harry decided to joke back: "Give me a minute, I'm thinking."

With a smile in his eyes, Dumbledore made an 'as you like' gesture, and waited. Harry finally said, "I can't think of any now... probably I'll think of a dozen tonight, but then it'll be too late."

"May I take that as an acceptance of the position? You need not give me an answer right this minute, you know. If you would like a few days to mull it over, you may certainly have them."

"No, thanks, I'd rather just say yes now and get it over with," Harry said with a mix of determination and resignation. "I know I'll end up saying yes in the end, and if I take more time to think, I'll just worry myself into a state, thinking of all kinds of arguments and problems. By saying yes now, I'll skip all that, and get straight into worrying about the actual teaching." Harry looked up at Dumbledore. "Okay, yes, I'll do it."

"Excellent, Harry." Dumbledore looked pleased, but in a way that made Harry suspect that Dumbledore had never had a moment's doubt about Harry's eventual response. "I deeply appreciate your willingness to do this. I know our students will benefit greatly."

"Well, here's one way to look at it," Harry said, half to himself, "I can't hardly be any worse than Lockhart or Umbridge. That's some consolation... Hermione will go crazy, she'll be so pleased, she got me that book, after all..." Something clicked in Harry's mind, and his eyes narrowed. "Professor, you said that you got more than one letter suggesting that I be made Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. One of those wouldn't be from Hermione, would it?"

In a very amused tone, Dumbledore said, "I'm sorry, but I am not at liberty to divulge the contents or sources of much of my private communications."

"I knew it," Harry exclaimed. He felt exasperated and proud at the same time.

"I should emphasize, Harry, that I had the idea to do this before it was recommended to me by anyone. If you would like someone to blame, you need look no further."

Somewhat abashed, Harry said, "No, I don't really want to blame anyone, I just kind of wished she'd have run it by me first. Of course, I'd have told her that she was off her nut."

"I should think so. You were looking at me in much the same way a short time ago," Dumbledore observed. "Of course, I am long since used to it, what with the business with the Daily Prophet last year."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that; can you imagine what they'll do with this? 'The Boy Who Lived to teach his fellow students at Hogwarts.'" Harry shook his head. "They'll make me look like a tragic hero or an arrogant upstart, and I'm not sure which is worse."

"I assume they will choose whichever characterization fits best with the thrust of the article," Dumbledore mused. "You do, however, have experience with this as well; I trust you will not be bothered by it."

"Usually I just don't read the paper, that does it okay. Funny how the fact that I'm used to being famous is a help here."

"It seems fair that it should help now and then, as it is quite a burden most of the time," Dumbledore agreed. "Now, let's take you down to Professor McGonagall's office."

They left Dumbledore's office, passing the stone gargoyles to which one wanting to enter the office had to give the correct password. Harry absently wondered what this year's password would be; his experience was that it was always a sweet or confection of some sort. He then realized that as a teacher, he would be told the password as a matter of course. He wondered what other aspects of life at Hogwarts would be different because of his new position.

Lost in his musings, he happened to glance up to see that they were just about to enter Professor McGonagall's office. As they walked in, McGonagall stood, and looked at Dumbledore expectantly. He smiled and said, "Minerva, may I present to you our new Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor." Harry glanced around the office, looking embarrassed.

McGonagall smiled; a small one, but by her standards it was a wide grin. "Welcome to the staff, Professor Potter."

Harry nearly flinched. "Are people really going to call me that?" he asked plaintively. "I don't know if I can get used to that."

"Well, if that's the worst thing to happen to you, you can be very grateful," advised McGonagall. "I daresay, however, that you will manage to get used to it."

"Indeed," agreed Dumbledore. "I seem to recall that it took me some time as well. I'll leave you two to it; I must be off on some errands. Minerva, I trust you will take him to my office when he is ready to go home?"

"Of course, Professor," she said, and he departed. To Harry, she said, "Please sit down." Harry did so.

"First, Harry, I would like to express my condolences for your loss, for Sirius's death. I know what he meant to you. And... well, you have had more than enough loss for one lifetime. I fervently hope that you will have no more."

She was looking at him with great sympathy. Since McGonagall was usually quite stern, Harry did not know whether to be more surprised by this or by her calling him by his given name, which she had never done before. He felt very affected by her concern; he had always liked her, even though she was strict.

"Thank you, Professor. I appreciate it," Harry said sincerely.

She nodded. Not wanting to linger on the subject, she asked, "So, how do you feel about becoming a teacher?"

"Right this minute, a bit terrified," Harry answered honestly. "Part of me is wondering how I managed to get myself into it."

"If I had to guess, I would say that you found it particularly difficult to say 'no' to Professor Dumbledore," she said with understated amusement. "You would not be the first to whom this has happened. Teaching will be unfamiliar at first, but after a while you will be fine, I'm sure."

Harry nodded, not saying anything. He very much hoped she was right, but he still felt overwhelmed by the whole experience.

"Now, I would like to discuss your O.W.L. results with you, in terms of how they will affect your schedule. First of all, here are the results themselves." She handed him a piece of paper.

Harry read it quickly, scanning the important parts. His scores were:
Astronomy: fail; Care of Magical Creatures: Exceeds Expectations; Charms: Outstanding; Defense Against the Dark Arts: Outstanding; Divination: fail; Herbology: Acceptable; History of Magic: fail; Potions: Exceeds Expectations; Transfigurations: Exceeds Expectations.

He didn't quite know what to feel; some scores were better than he'd expected, others, worse. He was surprised to see three 'fails', though he realized they were understandable: he'd never taken Divination seriously, and had expected

to fail after taking the exam; he felt History of Magic was borderline, but he missed the last ten minutes of the exam due to the pain and panic of the false vision that eventually led him to the Department of Mysteries; and as for Astronomy, he felt reasonably sure he would have passed had he not lost the time everyone else did due to the commotion that took place that night and was the source of Hermione's complaints that the exam results were not fair. Even so, he was not happy with three 'fails.'

The most shockingly positive result was the Exceeds Expectations score in Potions. Immediately after the exam, Harry felt he might have squeaked by with an 'Acceptable,' but was amazed to learn he had done even better. My potion must have ended up all right, he thought.

His other results were as expected or better; he hadn't expected an 'Outstanding' in Charms or an 'Exceeds Expectations' in Care of Magical Creatures or Transfigurations. On the whole, he was satisfied. He consoled himself with the thought that of his three 'fails,' none were in subjects that would affect his desired field. The Astronomy 'fail' bothered him a little, he realized; he should have passed, he felt, and while he didn't feel passionately about it as Hermione did, he could understand why it was so important to her.

He looked up and saw Professor McGonagall looking at him as if trying to discern his reaction to his results by his facial expressions. "It's kind of a mixed bag, isn't it?" she commented.

"Well, I suppose I could have done better in a few things, but overall it's not that far from what I thought would happen." He remembered Hermione's nascent crusade, and thought he would help her out if he could. "The Astronomy 'fail,' though... I really think I should have passed, but with what they did to you and tried to do to Hagrid, it was impossible to concentrate--"

"Yes, I understand, you needn't elaborate further," McGonagall interrupted him. "Believe me, I have already heard plenty on the subject from Miss Granger."

"And?" Harry prompted her. He was curious to know where she stood on the subject.

McGonagall sighed. "Objectively, I would say I lean a small bit in Miss Granger's direction. On the one hand, O.W.L.s are so important that a student should make every effort to ignore any distractions, even such as the events of that evening. The fact that Hagrid is your friend about whom you were greatly concerned should not affect the disposition--"

"We were concerned about you, too, Professor," Harry blurted out before he had a chance to think better of it; he knew that McGonagall had a particular aversion to being interrupted. "We thought they might have killed you."

McGonagall looked slightly annoyed and embarrassed at the same time. "Thank you, Harry," she said kindly. "Fortunately, the people at St. Mungo's know what they are doing. To continue, as I said, one can say that those taking the test should never allow themselves to be distracted. On the other hand, Miss Granger is quite correct when she points out that it is up to the testers to provide a distraction-free environment. In addition, then-Headmistress Umbridge," she continued, saying Umbridge's name with obvious distaste, "can certainly be held accountable, as she provoked the confrontation which caused the distraction, with disregard for the fact that testing was taking place nearby. So, I would say that Miss Granger has a fairly good case."

"It wasn't only us who were distracted," Harry pointed out. "Even Professor Tofty, after you were attacked, said something like, 'Really! Not even a warning! Outrageous behavior!' So, if even the professor was distracted..."

"Yes, that is also a very good point, one that Miss Granger did not fail to mention in her owl to me on the subject," McGonagall agreed. "However, in the end, this will not be for me, or anyone at Hogwarts, to decide. The O.W.L. board will make the final decision."

"Now, let us move on. I would like to discuss your schedule for this year. I assume that Professor Dumbledore has informed you that you may take fewer classes so that you will have time to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts?"

Harry nodded. "So, I guess I have to decide which classes I'm going to take." He paused. "Professor, what am I going to do about Potions? You said last year that I need a N.E.W.T. in them to become an Auror, but you also said that Professor Snape won't teach the N.E.W.T. class to anyone who got less than 'Outstanding' on the O.W.L., so I don't see how I can take the class. Isn't it kind of unfair to make it that hard to get in? I mean, even you only require 'Exceeds Expectations' to get into your N.E.W.T. classes."

McGonagall gave Harry a slightly sour look, annoyed that Harry seemed to be asking her to criticize a fellow professor. "My opinion of Professor Snape's standards is really not relevant. He is a professor and can set the standards he chooses."

"Yes, but couldn't you talk to him? Ask him to..." Harry trailed off, knowing that what he was about to suggest was useless; Snape hated Harry so much that Snape was bound to laugh in McGonagall's face if she asked such a thing, and McGonagall's expression confirmed it for Harry. "I'm sorry, Professor, but this is very important to me; I'd really like to become an Auror. You did say to Umbridge-"

"I was wondering whether you would bring that up," McGonagall said resignedly. "Yes, I did say to then-Headmistress Umbridge that I would stop at nothing to see

that you got the chance to become an Auror. I admit, and you probably already know, that I said it in anger, not necessarily expecting that I would have to follow through on it. Still," she said as Harry held his breath, "one must keep one's word, and I intend to do so here. I will ask Professor Snape to accept you into his class, and if he refuses, I will teach you Potions myself."

Harry was amazed that she would go that far. "Thank you, Professor, thank you very much. It means a lot to me."

She nodded briskly. "Now, as for the rest of your schedule. You will be taking Potions, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Charms, and Transfigurations. The other two choices are Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures. Which would you like to take?"

Harry considered. "Well, I really would hate to stop having classes with Hagrid."

McGonagall replied, "Yes, but you must consider the effect on your future career, not your friendship with a teacher. I'm sure Hagrid will understand if you choose not to take his class."

Harry was not at all sure of that, considering how emotional Hagrid could be at times, but decided not to argue the point. "Well, which class is more useful for becoming an Auror? It seems like neither one is that related."

"Yes, that's true," she agreed. "That is why I am giving you the choice, and why your class load is being reduced to five. But if you want my opinion, I would-by a very small margin-recommend Care of Magical Creatures. It would be easier to study Herbology outside the school in the future, if you wanted a thorough grounding, than Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid is quite resourceful in acquiring creatures."

"Yeah, I expect that it won't be long before we have a class on dragons, with a couple tied up just out of reach of his house," Harry joked.

McGonagall looked at him sternly. "I would reprimand you for that kind of comment, if I did not know that you mean it affectionately." Suddenly her frown vanished, and her tone became a confidential one. "To be honest, I've wondered the same thing for some time now. I only hope it happens after I'm retired."

Harry grinned, wondering whether she would have shared that with him if he were not now a fellow teacher. "Probably most students would say it would be cool, but now that I've had first-hand experience, I know better." He would not soon forget his encounter with the Hungarian Horntail in the Triwizard Tournament.

"Yes, I would imagine," she agreed. "Now, then, there is one more matter to discuss. I want you to know," she said, looking at him seriously, "that before the last school year, I recommended to Professor Dumbledore that you be made the Gryffindor house prefect. Despite your, ahem, checkered history with school rules, I

felt your leadership qualities made you suitable for the position. In retrospect, it is clear from your experience with the D.A. that my judgment was not mistaken." She gave him another small smile. Embarrassed again, Harry nodded. "Professor Dumbledore," she continued, "did not disagree with my judgment, but he felt that your, shall we say, unique status would make fulfilling your prefect duties more onerous. He asked me to submit another recommendation, so I chose Mr. Weasley. Mind you, I am not in any way dissatisfied with the job he has done."

"I am glad you chose him, I really am," Harry assured her. "It meant more to him, especially his family, than it would have to me, but it's very nice to know you would have chosen me, if I didn't have this... Professor, what exactly did you mean by my 'unique status?' Did you mean being famous, or the treatment I was getting in the Daily Prophet, or this connection I have to Voldemort?"

"The third," McGonagall answered. "Professor Dumbledore foresaw that your connection to Voldemort could complicate your life, and he felt you did not need another complication, honor though it may be."

"He was right," Harry said. "This past year was hard enough; being a prefect would have made things harder. Was that was you wanted to tell me?"

"No, I was just getting to that. This year, as Angelina Johnson has graduated, the Gryffindor Quidditch team needs a new captain. You are currently the senior team member, the one with the most experience. Not incidentally, you are an outstanding player; Oliver Wood tells me that he is sure that you could play professionally in the future if that were your goal. For those reasons, you would be a logical choice for team captain. However--"

"I'm going to be a teacher this year, and I'll be lucky to find the time just for Quidditch practice, never mind being captain," Harry finished her thought.

She gazed at him sternly. "Yes, that's right, but I will thank you not to interrupt me. I do not take kindly to it."

Harry looked repentant. "Sorry. The thing is, I'm not sure I'd make a great team captain anyway. You see, they have to know about strategy and tactics, and make game plans for the whole team. Wood was always doing that. But I'm a Seeker, and Seekers don't have to coordinate with the other team members that much. I think Ron would make a much better captain."

"Yes, I had a feeling you were going to suggest Mr. Weasley," said McGonagall.

"Well, he is the best person for it," Harry said defensively. "He's followed Quidditch all his life, he's a big fan, so he knows strategy backwards and forwards. Also, he comes from a family of good Quidditch players, so he's got more experience than he's had just being on the team. I really think he'd be good."

McGonagall regarded him evenly, giving no indication of how she saw matters. "Very well, I will take your advice under consideration. I just did not want to deprive you of such a well-deserved opportunity without your consent."

"Thank you, Professor, I appreciate it."

"Well, it appears then that we are done here. Unless there is anything else you would like to discuss?"

"No, thanks, Professor," Harry said after thinking a moment. "I guess I'll go home and start trying to figure out how to be a teacher."

"You will be fine, Harry, trust me," McGonagall assured him. "Professor Dumbledore once told me that a famous Muggle said, 'We have nothing to fear but fear itself.' Or, as a wizard put it, 'You can't escape a dragon if you're so scared that you can't run.' It comes out the same either way. If you get your anxiety under control, you will have done the hard part."

Harry knew from his Triwizard experience that it was true, but he still wasn't sure exactly how he was going to do it. "So, are we going back to Professor Dumbledore's office?"

"Not just yet; there is someone else here who wants a word with you. Would you come with me, please?"

Harry nodded and followed her. He wondered who else wanted to see him, but since she didn't tell him, he figured she wouldn't even if he asked. As they walked through the corridors and passageways, Harry thought about how different things looked when the school was so empty in the summer.

"Professor," he asked, "I was wondering, what does Peeves do in the summer? I mean, there's nobody here to bother, is there? It would be boring for him to stay here."

McGonagall chuckled. "You know, I'm not sure. I'm not here much in the summer myself, so I wouldn't know. Perhaps he goes into Hogsmeade to bother the residents there."

"But why is he even here at all?" Harry asked. "I mean, I don't care, but just out of curiosity... he does nothing but cause trouble. Couldn't Professor Dumbledore get rid of him if he wanted to?"

"Mr. Filch has asked the same question countless times, in rather more colorful language," McGonagall said. "Of course Professor Dumbledore could keep Peeves out, but he refuses to do so. He has said that Peeves 'keeps people on their toes,' I believe was the phrase he used, and another time he mentioned not wanting things to get boring. He feels that Peeves adds character to the school." She paused. "I have not always seen eye to eye with Professor Dumbledore on this matter, but I must

admit, Peeves earned his keep last year. That was a reminder to me not to question Professor Dumbledore's judgment."

Harry grinned. Peeves had mercilessly harassed Dolores Umbridge after Dumbledore fled Hogwarts last year, acts approved of by all who supported Dumbledore.

McGonagall and Harry entered a room which Harry, who again had not been paying great attention to where he was being taken, realized was the library. He looked across the room and saw a lone figure, sitting at a large table with three books spread out in front of her. Based on that, Harry would have known who it was even if he couldn't have seen her face.

"Miss Granger," McGonagall said, startling Hermione. "I believe you wanted to see Professor Potter when I was finished talking to him?"

Hermione's eyes went as wide as Harry had ever seen them. She just stared for a few seconds, then she let out a loud shriek and raced for Harry. Harry was getting used to being hugged by Hermione, so he wasn't bothered at all, even though she was more excited for him than he was for himself. She plowed into him and held him tightly, saying, "Oh, Harry, that's so wonderful..."

Harry smiled and hugged Hermione back, and glanced up to see Professor McGonagall with a very amused look on her face. Hoping they would know he was joking, he said, "Um, isn't there some Hogwarts rule about teachers hugging students?"

Hermione chuckled but didn't let go. McGonagall said, "Yes, it is assumed that the teacher in question will use his experience and maturity to determine whether or not it is appropriate. I feel you will somehow manage. When you are finished, come see me and I will take you to Professor Dumbledore's office." She departed.

Hermione took a half-step back, still holding Harry's shoulders. "It's so good to see you, Harry! It's great that we both happened to be here on the same day. And, my goodness, you're a professor! Isn't it amazing? Aren't you excited?" She finally let go of him, looking at him expectantly.

"Well, if by 'excited' you mean 'overwhelmed' or 'terrified,' then yes, I'm pretty excited," Harry replied. "Hermione, how can I be ready for this? I don't know if I can do it."

"Of course you can," Hermione said, trying not to be impatient with Harry's nervousness. "You taught twenty-five of us. How can this be any different?"

"Because we all wanted to be there. We were all motivated," Harry pointed out. "I'm going to be teaching a bunch of people-"

"This isn't like Divination or History of Magic, where people don't care," Hermione interrupted him with surprising vehemence. "Defense Against the Dark

Arts may be the most practical and important subject in the whole school. I promise you, nobody is going to come to class not caring whether they learn anything or not. They'll want to learn, and they'll pay attention to what you say. You don't have to give lectures if you don't want to; in fact, it may be better if you don't. If you want to, just do what you did with us last year. That worked pretty well."

"Yes, it did, I have to admit," Harry agreed. "Did you hear that all the fifth years in the D.A. got Outstanding on their O.W.L.s?"

"No, Professor McGonagall didn't tell me that, but I'm not surprised. We all were doing pretty well. I assume Professor Dumbledore told you that to explain why he asked you to take the job?"

"Yes, he did. He also said that a few people sent him owls suggesting that I be made a teacher." Feigning suspicion, he added, "I think I know who one of those people might have been."

"I was right, wasn't I?" Hermione answered, playing along and pretending she was wounded by Harry's accusation. "I was sure you'd make a good teacher, and Dumbledore agrees with me, so I'd say I'm vindicated. Just because you don't recognize it yet doesn't mean it's not true."

"Well, you keep on saying that, and maybe one of these days I'll believe it's true," Harry said resignedly. "You could be right, for all I know. It's just so new, and such a shock-I had never even thought about the idea-that it's very hard not to be intimidated by it right now. Maybe, hopefully, I'll get used to it by the time the term starts."

They sat down at the table Hermione had been working at when Harry and Professor McGonagall had come in. "You will, Harry, I'm sure you will," she said.

Harry appreciated her efforts to make him feel better. "Thanks," he said seriously. He looked at her for a moment and said, "See, now, if it was you, I could understand that. You're as close to a perfect student as there is. You could be a teacher, for sure."

Hermione smiled wistfully and shook her head. "No, Harry, I couldn't, certainly not now. There's a reason Dumbledore chose you and not me. Sure, I know lots of stuff, but knowing and learning aren't the same as teaching. I'd be impatient with the students because they don't study as much as I do. A teacher has to inspire the students to want to learn. You do that without even knowing you do. I know, I was in the D.A., I saw. People wanted to learn from you, they had confidence in you. Even Zacharias Smith, at the end."

Harry raised his eyebrows; if that was true, he hadn't known it. He mused that he was lucky to have Hermione as a friend; she was trying so hard to help him. It was really nice that she happened to be there...

"Hermione, I just thought of something. Why are you here? I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm really happy to see you, but it's not like you're here studying every day of the summer," he said, gesturing to the books on the desk. He paused. "Are you?"

She chuckled. "No, I'm not. I'm not even studying now. Professor McGonagall gave me special permission to come in and use the library today because I wanted to do research for my petition to the O.W.L. board. Didn't I tell you that on the phone yesterday? I could have sworn I did."

"Oh, that's right," he said. "Sorry, I'm a bit distracted, to say the least. How's it going? Found anything?"

"A few things so far, but they're contradictory. There are a few cases of people getting a chance to take the test again, but under more dire circumstances, like the students being attacked by wild creatures, things like that. Nothing I've found yet has spoken to our specific case. I talked to Professor McGonagall about it, and she thinks it'll come down to the board members using their judgment. But there is one thing I'm concerned about..." She trailed off.

Harry just nodded, gesturing for her to continue.

"The thing is," she went on, "that one possible outcome of this is that the entire exam is ruled invalid. I mean, what I'm hoping for is that just those who want to can take the test again, but it could end up that everyone has to take it again, whether they want to or not, whether they passed or not. If that happens..."

Harry nodded and finished her sentence. "...you're not going to be very popular."

"That's putting it mildly," she agreed. "It'll be a lot more like it was for you in our second year, when everyone thought you were the Heir of Slytherin. Except I'll be hated, not feared."

Harry nodded sympathetically. "Hard to say which is worse."

"Hated," she said immediately. "If you're feared, at least people will leave you alone because they're scared. I'm really getting nervous about doing this, Harry. I mean, this could affect people's lives. People could lose their O.W.L.s because of me. You could, for all I know."

He shook his head. "Nope. Failed Astronomy," he said simply.

"Oh, that's a relief," she said quickly, then suddenly covered her mouth, mortified at what she'd said. "Harry, I didn't mean-"

Harry laughed, causing her to halt her apology in mid-sentence. He said, "Don't worry, I knew what you meant. Really, I'm not that bothered either way. In a way, I kind of hope more people failed, so your idea becomes more popular."

"I hate to say it, but yes, that would help me," she agreed. "But for now, all I can do is wait for the school year to start, and see what people think. But I have to ask myself, it is right for me to even risk that? Can I justify doing this just so I can have my unblemished row of Outstandings? Would people be right to hate me if I did?"

Harry found it hard to answer that question, since he was more focused on what would make Hermione happy than abstract questions of right and wrong. He simply said, "Well, you should just try not to worry about it until the school year starts. Focus on other things, and this may work itself out."

"Maybe you're right," Hermione said. Then she smiled and said, "Of course, I could say the exact same thing to you, for your situation."

Harry smiled back as he realized the truth of what she said. "Yeah, but that would be really sneaky of you. I guess it's harder to take advice than to give it." He paused. "By the way, thanks for the birthday present. It's really nice, not to mention really useful."

"Honestly, I didn't really expect that Dumbledore would make you a teacher," Hermione said. "I hoped, but I thought the book would be useful for the D.A., if nothing else. In a way, it's too bad that there'll be no more D.A.-I liked that it was only people who really wanted to be there."

Hermione paused, then suddenly looking nervous and tentative, she said, "Harry, there was something I was going to ask you about on the phone yesterday, but it's probably better to do it here anyway. I was wondering... how you were doing. I mean..."

She seemed to be trying to find a way of asking without saying the necessary words, but he understood her meaning. "About Sirius, you mean," he said quietly.

She nodded, looking apologetic. "I've never lost anyone I've been that close to, but I think I can imagine how hard it's been for you. I almost don't want to ask, because bringing it up will just remind you of it, but I really want to know how you're doing with it. I've been really concerned about you."

Harry sat in silence for a moment. In a way he didn't want to talk about it, for the reason she had just mentioned, but in a way he did, because he hadn't talked about it at all since it happened. Also, Harry couldn't imagine who he could talk about this with if not Hermione. He couldn't brush her off with a 'fine, thanks' as he could with most people. "Some days are better than others," he said. "But in general, it gets a little less bad with time. I really miss him, though."

"I know," she said with a very sympathetic expression. "I wish there was something more I could do."

Harry suddenly remembered how he'd felt upon seeing Hermione struck down by the Death Eater in the Department of Mysteries. "There is," he said. "Stay alive." She looked at him quizzically.

"When you got hit, in the Department of Mysteries, Neville and I were checking for a pulse, and all I could think was, don't be dead, it's my fault if she's dead. I just couldn't bear to think of it. And then it happened, with Sirius. I don't know if I could stand to have it happen again. I feel like I'd just lose it."

"Did you feel like it was your fault with Sirius?" she asked.

"Yeah, I did," Harry said, emotion rising. "If I hadn't been fooled-"

"That's part of life, Harry," she said intensely, as if by the power of her conviction she could make him see things differently. "No one is perfect, and we can't be expected to be. What if I had died? It wouldn't have been your fault, just the fault of whoever killed me. I chose to go with you; I would have been furious if you'd tried to stop me. I was responsible, not you. When Sirius heard that you were in danger in the Department of Mysteries, if someone had suggested to him that he stay behind for his own safety, what do you think he would have said? He would have told them to go fly a kite! He was going to protect you, and that was that. You know that."

"Yes, he died protecting me! My parents already did that. How many more people, people I care about, are going to have to die protecting me?"

"However many it is, they'll risk it because they choose to, Harry," she said firmly. "And because they care about you, it's not right to deny them that. Not the dying, of course, but the taking risks to protect you. After all, you're like that, too! In the first year, you and Ron saved me from that troll. You didn't even know me, except that I was a bossy teacher's pet. You did it anyway! Why? Because you thought it was the right thing to do. You'd do it again in a second. I don't have to ask, I know. What if I were in danger and I told you not to come help me because then you'd be in danger too? You'd come anyway! You couldn't stand not to. You wouldn't worry that you might get killed and I'd feel guilty."

"I've thought about this a lot lately, Harry, because I thought you might feel this way. I think that the fact that we risk our lives for each other, not just you and I but people in general, is one of our noblest qualities. When we do, we make a statement about the other person and about ourselves. Because it's risky sometimes it goes bad, but that's the chance we take. And when it does go bad, we feel sad that we lost a friend, but we should honor their life and their sacrifice, not beat ourselves up over what they did. Sirius wouldn't want you to blame yourself for what happened. You know that."

Try as he might, Harry couldn't deny the truth in some of her words. "Part of me knows that, but..." He thought for a few seconds, then looked at her, still pained. "I know I can try to do that, and I think I will eventually, but the problem is... when I blame myself for what happened, there's at least some truth in it. You said it's part of life, and you may be right, but it's still my fault. It's more my fault than you know, in fact..." He trailed off and saw that she was waiting for him to finish the sentence, but being patient, knowing it was hard for him.

"When I was having those dreams, I wanted them to continue," he admitted. "I knew Professor Dumbledore wanted me to learn Occlumency so I wouldn't have them, but I wanted to keep having them anyway, I wanted to know what was behind the door I kept seeing, it was like I needed to know. I imagine that's part of what Voldemort had in mind. But the point is, I knew what I was supposed to do, and I didn't even try to do it, I did the opposite. No reason, just that it was what I wanted to do, so I did it. And look what happened."

She looked at him very sadly. "That still doesn't make it your fault," she said. "You had no way of knowing the dreams were deliberate, nobody warned you about it. They, Dumbledore, gave you way too little information. He told you what to do, but not why to do it, which is also important. If he had-"

He shot her an angry look. "I'm not going to blame him. It wasn't his fault."

"I'm not saying it was, Harry, really," she said, still sad in the face of his anger. "Just that there were all kinds of things that factored into it. You did what you thought was right with the information you had, and it's really understandable that you'd want to know what was behind the door. You can't blame yourself."

Harry's anger had faded, replaced by guilt and sadness. He suddenly felt as though he needed to get off his chest what had preoccupied him for the past month, alone on his bed on Privet Drive. "Yes, I can... I have, a lot. I've thought about this so much, trying to think of what I should have done differently. I feel like what it all comes down to is that I just acted on whatever I felt, didn't think first. Not only when I got the vision of Sirius being tortured, but other things... attacking Malfoy after the Quidditch match, talking back to Umbridge when I would have been better off keeping my mouth shut... not to mention yelling at you and Ron so much." He looked up at her with a very small smile, wanting to apologize without actually saying the words.

She nodded her appreciation. "It wasn't that bad."

Harry wondered whether she meant it, or was just trying to be nice. "Anyway, I just can't be doing that anymore. What if I lose my temper, do something stupid, and you die, or Ron, or Ginny... I just can't let that happen." He looked at her with a very serious expression, unconsciously conveying how much he worried about it. "I

need to control myself, I need to think before I do things. I need to grow up, basically. I'm sixteen, I'll be an adult in a year. I need to act like one, not like a spoiled kid who throws a fit every time something doesn't go his way."

"That's not how you've been acting," she said forcefully. "You've had so much stress in your life, it's really understandable that you might react to things like you have recently. I'm sure most people wouldn't have done as well as you've done with what life's thrown at you."

He thought for a few seconds. "Who knows, maybe you're right. But all I know is, I can't afford to do that anymore. I mean... what if next year, I'm sitting with Ron or Ginny, saying, if only I'd kept my head, Hermione would still be here... I need to do better."

Again, she looked at him with great sympathy. "You will, Harry, I'm sure. Don't worry, nothing's going to happen to me. I know it almost did last month, but I really think that's not going to happen again. Don't ask me why, I just don't think it will."

"I really hope you're right," he said after another pause. "And thanks... I appreciate your talking to me about it. I feel a bit better. Which is strange, because I'm not sure I feel less bad about how I acted, or less responsible for Sirius... I don't know exactly what it is I feel better about."

She nodded. "I know what you mean. It helps just to talk, Harry, if something's really bothering you. Even if nothing can really be done or changed immediately, it feels better to have talked about it. You've never been the kind of person to do that all that much, a lot of times you've just kept things bottled up. But talking is better. And if you can get things out of your system, you might find it easier to stay in control like you want to, not lose your temper so much."

"I wouldn't know," he admitted. "But maybe you would, so I should listen. Talking about that kind of thing isn't exactly what I'd think of doing. But I'll try." He paused. "I kind of wish I could have had this conversation with you before we went home from Hogwarts. It would have helped over the past month."

She shook her head. "It was way too soon. The wound was so fresh, you were in such pain, you couldn't have separated your emotions from the situation, even for a short time. But that's natural. I mean, if you were killed saving me, do you think I'd be able to not blame myself, even though I know rationally that it really wasn't my fault? No way. I'd cry and wail and beat on things and curse myself for ever having been born so you wouldn't have had to die saving me. It would all be irrational and I would know it but I would feel it anyway. It's part of being human."

"When you say that," Harry said, "the first thing I think is that I wouldn't want you to wish you had never been born, and then I realize that the fact that it's the first thing I think just proves your point. It emphasizes that you're right, that

Sirius wouldn't have wanted me to beat myself up all summer. He would have wanted me to remember him fondly and have as happy a life as I could. It's just kind of hard."

She nodded, then after a moment, said, "By the way, are you hungry at all? I've been here for a few hours now, and I could use some food."

"Yeah, it's been a while for me, too, sounds good. I haven't had anything since my birthday cake this morning. Mrs. Weasley sent it to me," he explained. He knew that Hermione knew that the Dursleys were highly unlikely to even recognize his birthday, much less do anything nice for him.

"That was very nice of her," Hermione said as they got up and started walking.

"It sure was," Harry agreed. "Also, it was pumpkin, so it's kind of more substantial, which is important when I'm at the Dursleys'." The topic of his food situation while living with the Dursleys took them into the kitchens, where they started looking around for house-elves to help them. They did not have to look for long.

"Harry Potter!" a voice shouted, and it was obvious to Harry who it was. Dobby ran up to him and hugged him around the waist. "Dobby is so happy to see Harry Potter! Harry Potter is great and brave, and will make an excellent teacher!"

Harry looked down at Dobby, startled. "How in the world did you know that? I only found out a little while ago!"

Dobby smiled. "House-elves is hearing many things, Harry Potter. Professors is talking where house-elves can hear, and they doesn't care, for they knows that house-elves is keeping their secrets." His smile grew even wider. "But this is not a secret, for of course Harry Potter knows about it. Hogwarts is very lucky to have Harry Potter."

Though he was used to hearing Dobby talk about him in the most outlandishly superlative terms, Harry still blushed. Hermione said, "Yes, that's true, Dobby, it really is," still trying to bolster Harry's confidence.

"Miss Hermione Granger, who is trying to free all the house-elves as Harry Potter has freed Dobby," Dobby said suddenly, favoring Hermione with a fervently admiring look. "Dobby is sad that house-elves does not appreciate Hermione Granger's help. They does not deserve such a kind and generous champion. How could Hermione Granger be anything else, though, being such a great friend of Harry Potter's? Hermione Granger is not only very clever-Dobby has overheard many teachers say so-but also virtuous and wise and compassionate."

Now it was Hermione's turn to blush. Harry smiled mischievously, enjoying her embarrassment, and said, "Yes, that's true, Dobby, it really is," parroting Hermione's most recent words. She gave Harry an annoyed look and blushed even more.

Dobby beamed. "Dobby would be honored to get some food, if you is hungry."

"Yes, that would be great, Dobby, thanks." Harry said. Dobby sped off.

Still smiling, Harry turned to Hermione. "You know, I think Dobby forgot to mention some of your good qualities. You are all those things he said, of course, but there's plenty more. For example-"

"Oh, shut up," she said, trying to look stern, but unable to help smiling. "He really does go overboard, doesn't he?"

Harry nodded. "You should have seen him that Christmas when Ron gave him the sweater his mother always makes. It was nothing to Ron, but Dobby was ready to canonize Ron on the spot." He paused. "Of course, living with the Malfoys all those years, you might think of the smallest act of kindness as a big, big deal."

Dobby ran back up to them. "The other house-elves is getting your food together." After a second's pause, he said, "Dobby has heard that Harry Potter again faced He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and again lived to tell of it." He had an unmistakably awed expression.

"Yeah, well... not everyone who was there that night lived to tell of it," Harry said somberly. "I wouldn't have lived if Dumbledore hadn't been there to save me."

"Professor Dumbledore is a great wizard," Dobby agreed, nodding. "But Harry Potter is still brave and noble. Dobby has been telling the other house-elves about Harry Potter's bravery."

"Why, Dobby?" Hermione asked curiously. "Are they interested?"

"No, they isn't, not really," Dobby admitted. "But Dobby wants to persuade the other house-elves to oppose He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Dobby is hoping Harry Potter's bravery will inspire them."

"Wouldn't they oppose him anyway?" Hermione asked.

"They doesn't like him, of course," Dobby explained, "but they thinks it isn't their business. They says that house-elves is only thinking of serving their masters, not getting involved in things outside their houses."

"But if Voldemort-" Harry started, but Dobby flinched badly, as though burned. "I'm sorry, Dobby, but I'm going to say his name. Professor Dumbledore told me I should. Besides, how can we fight him if we're not even brave enough to say his name?"

Dobby nodded, but looked miserable. "Dobby is sorry, sir. But Dobby is not nearly as brave as Harry Potter."

"I think you will be, Dobby, when you have to be," Harry assured him. Dobby straightened up proudly.

"Anyway," Harry continued, "I was saying that if he were to take over, some of their families would be killed, and they would either be killed or have to live with evil masters, like you used to. Doesn't that matter to them?"

Dobby's head bobbed up and down. "Of course Harry Potter is right. Dobby is trying to explain this to them. But house-elves is not used to thinking about anything outside their home. Even to think about it is hard for them. Dobby must be patient. But it may be difficult, since Dobby is wearing clothes and getting paid, they thinks his ideas is strange, and they doesn't want to listen to him."

Just then, two house-elves rushed up with plates full of food and flasks of pumpkin juice, and presented them to Harry and Hermione. They bowed, as did Dobby, who said, "Thank you for seeing Dobby, sir and ma'am! You is most kind!"

Harry and Hermione said good-bye and left the kitchens, heading for the Great Hall, where the students normally ate. "Funny," Harry commented, "how Dobby has this way of making me feel guilty when he praises and compliments me for doing something I didn't even intend to do in the first place. I mean, we went to get food, not to see Dobby, but as far as he's concerned, we honored him and paid him a huge compliment."

She nodded, and thought for a few seconds. "You know, after we graduate and you get your own place, he'd probably love to be your personal house-elf. He'd think it was the greatest job in the world."

Harry had never thought of that. He wondered if it was possible, and how he'd feel about having a house-elf.

Harry and Hermione had a long lunch, eating and talking well into the afternoon. Not only was it great for Harry to see Hermione again, but she kept trying to provide moral support to overcome his nervousness about becoming a teacher. With her help, he was starting to get used to the idea, and he was even looking forward to reading more of the book she got him for his birthday. He thought the more he read it, the more comfortable he'd be. She cautioned him that while she should take ideas from it that he liked, he shouldn't do anything from it that he was uncomfortable with. By the time they finished, he felt a lot better, and he told her so.

"Thanks, Harry," she said, obviously pleased. "I'm really glad I could help."

"Me, too," he said. "I just wish I could help you more with the O.W.L. thing."

"You've done what you can," she assured him. "I'll do a little more research today before I go home, then I'll just have to wrestle with my conscience over the rest of the summer. Can I walk you back to Professor Dumbledore's office?"

"Yeah, sure," said Harry. "We just have to stop by Professor McGonagall's office first, she's supposed to escort me there." They headed in that direction.

"So, you are ready to go home?" asked McGonagall when they arrived at her office.

"Yes, I am," answered Harry, and the three of them set off to Dumbledore's office.

She noticed that Harry seemed a bit jauntier than before. "Feeling any better?" she asked.

"Yes, thanks," Harry replied. "Talking about it with Hermione has helped. It doesn't seem quite so impossible now."

As they came within sight of the gargoyles which guarded the headmaster's office, Harry saw Dumbledore and Professor Snape leaving Dumbledore's office and heading in their direction. This ought to be good, Harry thought wryly. At least Snape can't be as horrible to me as he'd like, with Dumbledore and McGonagall around.

"Ah! Professor McGonagall! Harry! Hermione!" Dumbledore exclaimed in cheerful greeting. Harry made eye contact with Snape, who seemed to be trying to put up the most polite expression he could, but still looked as though he smelled something truly foul.

"Professor Dumbledore, Professor Snape," greeted McGonagall cordially. Harry and Hermione nodded to both.

"Ah, yes, Severus, this gives me a chance to introduce to you the newest member of our faculty," Dumbledore said.

Harry concentrated on keeping his face blank. No smiling, no nothing.

Snape looked around in obvious confusion. "Headmaster? I don't understand. I see only the five of us."

"Yes, indeed," said Dumbledore agreeably. "I have prevailed upon Mr. Potter to accept the post of Hogwarts' Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor."

There was silence for about five seconds; it seemed that everyone was waiting for Snape's reaction. Snape's face was blank, as though trying to process information that would not compute. Finally, he said, "I'm sorry, Headmaster, I must not have heard you properly. Would you say that again, please?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "You know, Severus, that was exactly how Harry reacted when I asked him to take the job, almost word for word."

Snape was so astounded he wasn't even looking nastily at Harry. "Headmaster... surely, this is... unprecedented..." His expression left little doubt but that he thought this was a very bad idea, but with Dumbledore, he would only go so far.

Dumbledore continued smiling. "Again, exactly what Harry said earlier. Harry brought up six specific objections to my request. It is not like him to be so... disagreeable," he said, glancing at Harry in such a way as to make sure Harry knew he wasn't serious. "Fortunately, in the end, he reluctantly acceded to my request, for which I thank you again, Harry," Dumbledore said, looking at Harry benignly. "I know you did not want this."

Harry's mind raced. Oh, I see what he's doing, Harry thought. He's making sure Snape knows that I didn't want this, so Snape can't claim later to me or anyone that I somehow connived or tricked Dumbledore into giving me a privilege I didn't deserve. He's making sure that he's the target of Snape's wrath, if there is any. Well, it is true, and better him than me—at least Snape won't be nasty and vicious with him.

"And, wouldn't have imagined it in a million years," Harry affirmed vigorously and truthfully. "All I can say is, I'll do my best."

"And we can ask no more than that," Dumbledore said kindly. "Well, Professor Snape and I must be moving along. Harry, Hermione, I hope you have pleasant summers indeed. Minerva, I will be seeing you later. Come along, Severus."

Dumbledore gently guided Snape away, Snape still speechless. Harry felt that Snape was looking at Dumbledore as though he were truly concerned for Dumbledore's mental well-being.

"Well, that wasn't so bad," Hermione commented to Harry. "It was very good of Professor Dumbledore to do that, to try to direct Professor Snape's anger away from you."

"Yes, it was, but it won't work in the long run," said Harry. "No matter what Professor Dumbledore says, next time I'm alone with him or even in a class..." He trailed off, feeling the rest of the sentence was obvious.

Hermione finished it anyway. "...he'll be really nasty and make all kinds of insinuations or outright slanders, I know."

McGonagall's eyes went wide. "Miss Granger, you are talking about a Hogwarts professor! You will speak with the proper respect!"

Hermione looked at McGonagall earnestly. "Professor, I respect you, and I'll do as you ask, for your sake. But I've been in classes with Harry for five years, and I've seen him treat Harry so badly, for so long, for so little reason, that it's very hard to think of him with any respect. He takes shots at me, too, but I'm always raising my hand and drawing attention to myself. Harry never does, but Snape singles out Harry anyway. Ask any Gryffindor fifth year, they'll tell you."

Harry said nothing; he didn't know whether Hermione's outburst would do any good, but he appreciated the impulse behind it.

McGonagall stared at Hermione for a few seconds, then headed towards Dumbledore's office, her face impassive, Harry and Hermione following. Harry took this to mean that she had nothing more to say on the topic. He had never seen a student be as frank with McGonagall as Hermione had just been, and he suspected that it was only McGonagall's respect for Hermione that stopped her from admonishing Hermione further.

They entered Dumbledore's office, and McGonagall gestured toward the cat figure on Dumbledore's desk. Harry said goodbye to McGonagall and Hermione, thanking the latter again for the book. He then grasped the Portkey to return to his other, less preferred world.

Chapter 3

The Wizard and the Boxer

It was by now early evening, and twilight was just beginning to settle over Little Whinging as Harry walked home from Arabella Figg's house. He wondered what reaction, if any, he would get from Aunt Petunia when he walked in the door. She was bound to still be furious over what Professor Lupin had done, Harry thought. Would she still insist on him staying in his bedroom? That wasn't going to work, not if he was going to start Occlumency lessons with Professor Dumbledore next week. He decided that he would act as if her punishment had never happened, and see whether she reacted. If she tried to keep him in his room, Harry knew she would have to worry about more than a red lawn. He was sure it wasn't worth it to her.

Harry turned the corner onto Privet Drive; the Dursleys' house was six houses away. He glanced up and saw three boys on the sidewalk about three houses down, walking in his direction. He thought nothing of it until, thinking they looked vaguely familiar, he looked up again.

He couldn't believe it. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle? On Privet Drive? What in the world are they doing here? Harry asked himself, then answered it at once: they're here to see you, obviously. He quickly calculated his options. He could probably turn around and outrun them, but they could always wait in front of his home, and he'd have to get past them sooner or later. Neither he nor they could use magic, being underage, so it had to be that Malfoy intended to give Harry two bad choices: forego the use of magic and get beaten up, or use magic to defend himself and risk expulsion, as had nearly happened last year. There had to be another option, he told himself.

But, wait, I'm always being followed, aren't I? he thought. He had no specific confirmation that this was still the case, but it seemed a reasonable assumption. If it's true, then I'll be safe, but... whoever's following me won't want it known that they're doing so, and won't want to intervene openly. How far would they let him get beaten up before intervening, if at all? Harry decided he couldn't count on help that was iffy and might not even be there in the first place. He decided to play it by ear and keep his wand handy, but only to be used as a last option.

By now, they were one house away and closing, standing between Harry and four Privet Drive. He saw Malfoy smile, and say loudly, "Well, what do you know, guys, it's Harry Potter! Isn't that something!" Crabbe and Goyle snickered as usual whenever Malfoy said something obviously intended to be funny.

Harry stopped walking about ten feet away from them, his posture signaling a readiness to use his wand. "Yeah, imagine that," he said sarcastically, "finding me walking along the street where I live. You must be so surprised."

"Is this where you live? Really? We had no idea," said Malfoy, not bothering to pretend he really meant it. "We were just looking around to see what Muggle neighborhoods look like."

"Yeah, because you're so interested in Muggles," Harry retorted. "What the hell do you want, Malfoy?"

Malfoy raised his eyebrows at Harry's language, but otherwise ignored it. "Well, since we have you here, Potter, we thought we'd have a nice chat with you," he said, not troubling himself to be subtle about his intentions.

"We'? You mean, they're actually going to speak?" taunted Harry, motioning at Crabbe and Goyle. They turned to Malfoy with questioning expressions, as if this possibility hadn't occurred to them. Malfoy rolled his eyes.

"No, didn't think so," Harry continued. "No, I always think of Crabbe and Goyle as being like those people in the Muggle TV programs who never say anything, because they'd have to pay them if they did." Seeing nothing but confused looks, Harry remembered, "But you probably don't know what TV is, it's a Muggle thing. Anyway, Malfoy, I'll be happy to have a chat. Would you like to come round the house for some tea?"

Harry fleetingly wondered what would happen if Malfoy took him up on the invitation. Aunt Petunia would throw a fit and throw them out, solving his problem, but of course he knew that wouldn't happen.

"With Muggles?" Malfoy sneered. "No thanks, here will do quite fine."

"Okay," Harry answered. "So, what shall we chat about?"

"Let's start with the slander you've been spreading around about our families," Malfoy said, smiling with anticipation. "You said all of our fathers were Death Eaters

in that stupid Quibbler rag. No one believes it, of course, but you still can't say things like that. Now, you had better-"

"Oh, get off it, Malfoy," Harry interrupted him. "It's only us here, no one to impress or fool. We all know your fathers are Death Eaters, there's no point in even arguing it. The Prophet re-printed the article, so now people do believe it. So is there anything else, or was that going to be your excuse to have at me?"

"No, nothing else, except that you deserve what you're about to get," said Malfoy smugly, motioning Crabbe and Goyle forward.

They stopped after two steps when Harry whipped out his wand. "I wouldn't, if I were you," he said to Crabbe and Goyle. "I don't think Malfoy cares all that much about your health."

"Empty threat, Potter," Malfoy said loudly. "I don't think you want to be using magic, not after what happened last year. You're already skating on thin ice."

"I'm allowed to use it in self-defense, as you well know," Harry replied. "It seems to me that this qualifies. I'm quite willing to try, and find out." He hoped he wouldn't have to, though.

"But who would believe that this qualifies? It would be our word against yours, and you're already well-known as an underage magic offender," said Malfoy.

"Yes, but you're forgetting that it's different from last year," Harry pointed out. "Last year in the Prophet, I was an attention-seeking nutter. The deck was stacked against me, and I still got away. This year, the Boy Who Lived is back in favor at the Ministry, or haven't you been reading the Prophet lately? Too busy visiting your father in jail? Give it a try, I don't think you'll like what happens."

Malfoy looked indecisive and furious. Harry knew he was pushing Malfoy hard, but he thought it was to his advantage if Malfoy lost his temper. If he could provoke Malfoy into using magic first, he could legitimately defend himself, and there would be no question of charges. Using magic to defend himself against fists was more ambiguous.

Malfoy appeared to have made his decision. "All right... Crabbe! Goyle!-"

He was interrupted by a new voice, coming around the same corner Harry had turned on when he first saw the three Slytherins.

"What's going on? Who are you?" Harry turned and saw his cousin Dudley, no doubt coming home from a hard day's bullying, addressing Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle.

"Who are we?" Malfoy repeated. "We're the ones who'll make you regret you ever saw us if you don't get out of here, right now."

Harry knew he had to think fast. This could get bad very fast, or it could be his ticket out of the situation without having to use magic, if things went right. He just had to make sure Dudley and Malfoy disliked each other more than him.

Dudley, meanwhile, looked at Malfoy with a disbelieving expression. "You'll- make me-" he sputtered.

"Yeah, that's right," Malfoy sneered, "so get lost."

Oh, this is great, Harry thought. Malfoy's mistaking Dudley's contempt for fear. This is almost going to be fun to watch, but I still have to be careful.

Dudley looked at Harry, incredulous. "Are these your friends? Are they stupid, or what?"

"Looks that way," Harry agreed. "I guess I should introduce you. Dudley, this is Draco Malfoy, and his... associates, Victor Crabbe and Gregory Goyle. They're from my school. Guys," he said, addressing the Slytherins, "This is my cousin, Dudley."

"What are more freaks from your school doing here?" Dudley asked Harry accusingly. Turning to Malfoy, he added, "You'd better get off my block right now!"

"Freaks?" Malfoy sputtered. "Your block?" Clearly both Dudley and Malfoy thought they had all the control in this situation, and Harry wasn't quite sure which one really did. It all depended on Malfoy's willingness to use magic in defiance of Ministry rules. Harry was still in danger, but he chuckled inwardly: Malfoy was about to find himself in the very predicament in which he'd planned to place Harry.

Malfoy had recovered the power of speech. "No Muggle ape is going to tell me where I can and can't go! Look at him, he looks like Hagrid's shorter, even dumber brother!"

Harry knew Dudley hadn't understood the word 'Muggle,' but from the incredulous and angry look on his face, had understood everything else just fine. Dudley's meaty hands had already formed into fists. He looked at Harry.

"Are these your friends?" Dudley demanded.

"No, they aren't," Harry said quietly. "They're... classmates. To be honest, I don't like their attitude toward Muggles, or toward normal people. 'Muggle' is a wizard word that means normal people. They think they're better than normal people."

"We are better than Muggles! But not according to the famous Harry Potter, friend of Muggles everywhere," said Malfoy contemptuously. "You like Muggles so much, Potter, why don't you stay here with them all year? Leave our kind alone!"

"Harry," said Dudley urgently and quietly, "you aren't allowed to..." he mimicked a wand-swishing motion. "Are they?"

"Nope. Same rules as me. They're in big trouble if they do," Harry said confidently.

Dudley's face broke into a wide grin. "I'm going to enjoy this," he said, moving forward.

Harry decided to give Malfoy one last chance, though he knew it was futile. "Malfoy, you'd better quit while you're ahead," he advised. "Dudley's not going to have any problems. He's a boxing champion."

"What do I care if he's good at packing boxes?" Malfoy snarled. "I guess someone has to do it, but it's not going to help him any."

Harry and Dudley, who were a foot away from each other, exchanged amazed stares. Dudley actually stopped and leaned into Harry. "Is he joking?" Dudley asked, genuinely curious.

"No," Harry answered. "I think he doesn't know what it means."

"But look at him," Dudley continued, referring to Malfoy's tall but slight build. "Does he really think he can take me? Is he that stupid?"

"He doesn't think he'll have to," Harry explained. "He thinks his friends will. He doesn't know that they can't."

Dudley chuckled, and without further delay, headed toward Crabbe and Goyle. Harry stood alertly, holding his wand to protect Dudley from any magic should it become necessary.

Dudley didn't wait for Crabbe and Goyle to come after him; he went straight for Goyle, on his left. Goyle looked anxious; he was big, but not quite as big as Dudley. He nervously looked over at Crabbe and took up a defensive posture. Crabbe moved toward Goyle, but not before Dudley reached him.

Dudley feinted with a left to the chin. Goyle reflexively reacted to that while Dudley came in with a right to the jaw. Goyle went down, yelling in alarm and pain.

Crabbe came in and grabbed Dudley, intending to wrestle him to the ground, where Dudley could be held and dealt with. But Crabbe wasn't able to get Dudley to the ground. He moved Dudley around a bit and swung him off-balance, but his lack of real fighting experience showed. Dudley spun aside and threw Crabbe off him, showing an agility Harry wouldn't have expected of him. Must be all the boxing training, Harry thought. Crabbe staggered a few steps and fell. Goyle was still on the ground, moaning and holding his jaw.

"What's wrong with you two? Get up!" yelled Malfoy, angry and slightly panicked.

Both got to their feet, Crabbe faster than Goyle. Dudley, smelling blood, advanced on Crabbe. Crabbe swung at Dudley, but it was a roundhouse swing, and Dudley could see it coming a mile away. He easily dodged it, and punched the off-balance Crabbe solidly in the stomach. Crabbe doubled over, but didn't go down.

Goyle finally got involved again, but Harry was sure that he now saw fear in Goyle's eyes. Goyle swung wildly, landing only a glancing blow against Dudley's chest. Dudley gave Goyle two quick left jabs to the chin, knocking him off balance, then

connected with a right to Goyle's jaw again. Goyle went down, yelling in pain again, more loudly this time.

Dudley advanced on Crabbe again. Crabbe was just starting to straighten up from the blow to the stomach he'd taken. Dudley feinted a right to the stomach; Crabbe used both hands to cover it. Oh, boy, Harry thought, he's leaving himself wide open. Even I know you're not supposed to do that. Dudley took the obvious opportunity, and finished Crabbe off with two left jabs to the chin followed by a right to the nose. Crabbe went down with what Harry was sure was a broken nose.

Dudley advanced on a seriously panic-stricken Malfoy. "Now," Dudley said menacingly, "you might want to think about taking back some of what you said, like the things about 'ape' and 'stupid.' I might even let you run away like the coward you are if you apologize. Whaddaya say?"

Fury and fear blazing in his eyes, Malfoy held out his wand. "I'm no coward, you moron, and if you step one foot closer I'll curse you so badly your mother won't recognize you!"

Dudley stopped and glanced over at Harry, whose wand was out and pointed straight at Malfoy.

"There is zero chance of that happening, Dudley. He can't do it," Harry said, never taking his eyes off Malfoy.

"You don't think I'll break the law?" Malfoy sneered. "I will, and I'll get out of it. The name Malfoy still means something."

"Yeah, it means 'evil,'" Harry rejoined. "But that's not what I meant. I mean, you can't curse him, because I'm every bit as fast with a wand as you are, probably faster. I'll have Protection Charms on him so fast nothing you do will touch him. And if you think I'm going to get in trouble for that, you really are dumb." Then, to Dudley: "Nothing he does will touch you, Dudley. That's a fact."

Dudley smiled again. "As I was saying," he said to Malfoy, "yes, you are a coward, and a dumb one at that. You're a coward because you have these losers," glancing at the prone Crabbe and Goyle, "do your fighting for you, and you're dumb because they don't even know how to fight. So this is what you get. Now, about that apology? One more chance before you end up on the pavement like them."

If Harry knew one thing about Malfoy, it was that he'd rather get beaten up than apologize, especially to a Muggle. Malfoy also wouldn't run away, finding it too humiliating. But Harry also knew that Malfoy would rather break rules than get beaten up. So, he kept his wand at full readiness.

Malfoy was in a corner, and he clearly knew it. He gave vent to his fury. "I don't think so, you filthy Muggle scum."

Dudley advanced on Malfoy. Harry prepared to cast the Protection Charm.

As Malfoy opened his mouth to curse Dudley, Harry shouted "Protego!" Or, rather, he tried to. No sound came out of his mouth.

Malfoy pointed his wand at Dudley and shouted, "Stupefy!"

The spell bounced off Dudley harmlessly. He continued to advance.

Harry struggled to speak, but couldn't make a sound. He was slightly panicked, wondering what was protecting Dudley if it wasn't him. Malfoy and Dudley, whose eyes were solely on each other, did not notice.

Malfoy tried again. "Petrificus Totalus!"

Nothing happened. Dudley was almost on top of Malfoy, who scrambled back a few steps and raised his wand. "Stupefy!" he bellowed. There was no effect.

Truly panicked now, Malfoy darted a few steps to Dudley's right, focusing on not getting immediately hit. He glanced accusingly at Harry. "Since when can you do spells silently?"

Harry had been trying to make test noises for the past few seconds so he would know when he got his voice back. It returned in the middle of Malfoy's question.

So, he thinks I did that, Harry thought. Who is doing it, anyway? Whoever's following me? It suddenly dawned on Harry that that had to be the case, and that he was Silenced so that he couldn't get in trouble by doing magic, and whoever that was had Protected Dudley. It was therefore important not to let Malfoy know that Harry hadn't Protected Dudley, as then Malfoy, and soon the Death Eaters, would know that Harry was being shadowed.

Harry thought up a quick retort. "You liked Umbridge so much, don't blame me that she didn't teach you anything. At least I did something about it." Harry liked that answer. A good comeback, and vague enough not to really answer the question. "You know, Malfoy," Harry continued, wand still at the ready, "I'm really thinking that my cousin deserves an apology. You might want to give it your most urgent consideration."

Dudley was at that moment almost within arm's reach of Malfoy, who kept moving enough to barely stay out of harm's way. "Real urgent," Dudley agreed.

Malfoy cried, "You'll pay for this, both of you!"

Dudley was finally within range. "I think you've got that backwards," he said as he raised a fist.

There was a loud popping noise, and Malfoy disappeared.

Dudley looked dumbstruck. "What happened? Where is he?" he asked, looking around.

Harry was almost equally amazed. "He Disapparated," Harry said, temporarily forgetting that the word would mean nothing to Dudley. At Dudley's blank look,

Harry added, "Sorry, it's a wizard word for disappearing and reappearing somewhere else. But it's covered under the rules, too. He'll be in deep trouble for that, and for the spells he tried to do on you."

Dudley exhaled in frustration. "I'd rather he'd gotten in the same kind of trouble they got in," gesturing to Crabbe and Goyle, who were still on the ground.

"I couldn't agree more," Harry said. "Insulting people, then running away... you were right, he sure is a coward. What about them? Are they unconscious?"

"Nah, they're just pretending," Dudley said as he jostled Crabbe with his foot. Harry saw very slight signs of movement. "You see it all the time in boxing. Guy goes down, knows he's lost, he stays down and plays dead."

Harry felt that Dudley was probably referring more to beatings than to boxing; he knew that in boxing you could get up after the referee said the fight was over. He felt it best not to say anything, however; this could be a chance to form some rudimentary bond with Dudley, and the past notwithstanding, he felt he should try. Dudley had done him a good turn, even if by accident.

"Well, let's just leave them there, then," Harry suggested. "They'll crawl home somehow, I suppose. Guess we should be getting back ourselves."

Dudley grunted in agreement, and they headed off toward the Dursley home.

"Aren't you going to get in trouble, though?" Dudley asked. "You used yours too, after all, and you're not supposed to."

"We're allowed to use it in self-defense, which is why I didn't end up getting punished last year, when I drove those things away," Harry explained. "Defending non-magical people from magical attack is also allowed. I just had to be careful not to do any offensive spells. Much as I would've liked to," he added.

"Say, you were pretty good with that thing," Dudley commented, to Harry's amazement. Dudley was usually as magic-averse as his parents. "Never even saw how you did it. You that fast?"

Harry was not about to even consider telling Dudley that he hadn't actually done anything, that someone else had. He preferred that Dudley think that Harry had protected him, and explaining being followed would be too complicated anyway.

"Well, not to brag, but yes, I've been told that," Harry admitted. "It's just reflexes, is all. But him," meaning Malfoy, "he thinks he's better than everyone, both wizards and non-wizards. Couldn't hardly be more wrong. By the way," he continued, hoping that Dudley would be receptive to what he was trying to do, "you need to know that not all wizards are like that. People like him are really the worst. Most are perfectly friendly and good people, and most don't have his attitude about non-magical people."

Dudley looked at Harry suspiciously. "What about the ones from a couple of years ago? The thing with my tongue?"

"Oh, them, they're harmless, they're major practical jokers. At school they were constantly giving out enchanted snacks to people. It didn't take long to learn not to accept food from them." Harry went on to explain about Fred and George's new business, and products like Skiving Snackboxes, and how they worked.

"...so they became real popular, everyone wanted a box," Harry concluded. He could see that Dudley was very intrigued by the idea.

"I can see why, sounds fantastic!" said Dudley eagerly. "Wish we could buy stuff like that. Get out of a class any time you want, make a day of it... classes are always so boring..."

"At our school too." Harry agreed.

"And it's totally safe?"

"Oh, sure. I saw dozens of people use them, and there were no problems at all."

Dudley raised his eyebrows. "Dozens?"

"Well, one teacher was really unpopular," Harry explained. "People were puking left and right. She lost whole classes to those things."

Dudley laughed heartily, no doubt imagining it. Then he suddenly stopped, so Harry did too. They had almost arrived at four Privet Drive.

Dudley leaned over and spoke quietly. "Listen, do you think you could..."

Harry's eyebrows rose into his hair. "You mean, get you a box?"

Dudley nodded. "It would be so cool..."

Harry was stunned beyond words. He almost felt as though he'd been Silenced again. After a few seconds, he managed to say, "Yeah, I'm pretty sure I could. But if your parents found out... they would absolutely go through the roof, with no magical help whatsoever."

Dudley grinned. "That's no problem at all. You'd be amazed at what I do that they don't know."

Bet I wouldn't, Harry thought, but of course didn't say. "OK, I'll be going to London in a few weeks to get my stuff for the start of the next term. I should be able to get a box and bring it back, so you can have it before your term starts."

"Great. Thanks," said Dudley. Harry was amazed further; he was sure that this was the first time a resident of four Privet Drive had ever thanked him for anything.

"No problem," Harry responded. "Shall we?" he asked, gesturing to the front door.

Harry and Dudley walked into the Dursley home.

No sooner had they walked in the door than Harry heard Petunia yelling, "They're here, Vernon! They're here!" She came running over and started looking Dudley over worriedly. "Are you all right, Diddykins?" She threw a dirty glance at Harry. "Is everything all right?"

Dudley started to blush. "Dudley, okay, Mum? Dudley," he muttered. He glanced over at Harry to see if he was smiling. Harry wanted to, but knew he'd better not. He just gave Dudley a sympathetic 'what-are-you-gonna-do?' look. "And of course I'm all right," Dudley continued. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I've just been on the phone with two of the neighbors. They say they saw both of you, fighting with three other boys. And," she said, now glaring at Harry, "that two of you were holding your..." Harry knew she hated to say the word 'wand', "...things."

Harry and Dudley looked at each other, then quickly looked away so as not to burst out laughing. Harry barely managed to keep a straight face. "I did the actual fighting," Dudley said. "Not much point in him trying. He just kept an eye on them, so they couldn't use their... things." Harry nodded in agreement.

They walked into the living room. Vernon was sitting in his recliner, holding his usual after-work cocktail. He addressed Harry suspiciously. "What are you doing inviting friends to this block anyway, boy? You don't see enough of those weirdos ten months of the year?"

"I didn't invite them, and they're not my friends!" Harry almost shouted. Calm down, Harry told himself. Calm down. "They are from my school, same grade as me, but they're enemies, not friends. They came here to harass me, to pound me a bit if they could."

Vernon's tone suggested that that would not be a bad thing at all in his book. "Couldn't they do that at the school?"

"No, too many teachers around," Harry answered.

"But why didn't they just use their..." Vernon thought for a few seconds. "Wait, same age as you, so they couldn't either... so you had to either defend yourself with that," meaning the wand, "and get in trouble like last year, or take the pounding."

Harry was impressed that Vernon had pieced it together. "That's exactly it," Harry agreed. "Then Dudley came along and messed up their plan. Saved my bacon," he added. Harry didn't want Vernon and Petunia thinking he wasn't grateful for Dudley's help.

"Hmpf," opined Vernon, as though he wasn't sure that he approved of what Dudley had done. "That's our Dudley, generous to a fault." Harry tried very hard not to react.

"All right, now I want to hear the whole story, what really happened," Vernon continued. "I want you," pointing at Harry, "up in your room so he can tell us what went on without being interrupted." So Dudley can lie about what happened without being contradicted if he wants to, Harry translated in his head. "So, off you go. We might have some questions for you later."

Harry turned to go, then decided on one more goodwill gesture, hoping it wouldn't be too much.

"Dudley," he said, extending his hand. "Thanks. I owe you one."

Dudley examined the hand for a second, as if checking for traps. He looked at Harry, who gave him a look that assured him that nothing was amiss. Dudley reached out and shook it.

"Wasn't like it was hard or anything," Dudley allowed.

"For you, anyway," Harry said, and headed upstairs.

As he walked into his room, he decided that he had to know what Dudley was telling Vernon and Petunia. Harry quickly unlocked his trunk and pulled out the Extendable Ears, went to the door, and deployed them. To his surprise, Dudley gave a straightforward and accurate account of the incident. Harry was particularly surprised by Dudley's answer to Vernon's question about why Harry didn't protect Dudley by using magic on Malfoy. "It's these rules they have," Harry heard Dudley say. "Harry couldn't attack him, but I could tell he really wanted to. I saw his face. It was like, 'just give me a reason.' So now, Harry tells Malfoy that anything Malfoy does, he'll block. So I started in on Malfoy."

"You believed Harry?" Vernon exclaimed. "That was taking a pretty big chance, wasn't it? He could've been lying, you could've ended up a newt or something."

"I knew he wasn't, Dad," Dudley said. "You fight for a while, and you can tell a lot from people's eyes. Harry was dead serious. I gotta say, I was surprised. With a wand in his hand, he's not afraid of anything. There's a look you see in the eyes of champion boxers, like they know they can handle anything, they have no fear. He had that look. I can't explain it, but I know it when I see it."

Vernon grunted. "You sound like you respect him."

Dudley's tone sounded like a shrug. "I'm not saying I want to go join up at his school or anything. I just know what I saw." Dudley also related to Vernon and Petunia what Harry had said afterwards, that most wizards weren't like Malfoy. The overall tone of the conversation suggested that while Vernon and Petunia's attitude about wizards and magic hadn't changed, Dudley's had, for the better.

After Dudley went up to his room, Harry kept listening. There was silence for a few minutes. Then, he heard Vernon say, "Well, what do you think?"

Petunia paused. "I think I will be very happy a year from today. Harry will be seventeen, can leave this house, and no more magical people or things will trouble this house or this family. It's bad enough we had to take in a wizard. It's worse that it's one who seems to have a target printed on his back. Dudley could have been seriously hurt."

"But Harry made sure he wasn't," Vernon mused. "I wouldn't have thought it. I guess that means he was telling the truth last year, that he really did protect Dudley from those dementor thingies?"

"I think so," Petunia answered. "I don't think any spells can do what was done to Dudley, and it's consistent with what I heard that Potter boy tell Lily about them. Poor Dudley..."

"Maybe that's what Dudley meant," Vernon said, "by that look in Harry's eyes he was talking about. If you've had to fight off things that can kill you, a blond kid with a wand and his two minions probably doesn't seem so bad."

Petunia moaned, "Oh, why did Lily have to go and become a witch? Why were we cursed with that? Why did she go and get herself killed and get us stuck with Harry so we couldn't escape that world? All we ever wanted to do was be regular, normal people. Is that too much to ask?"

Harry rolled his eyes as he listened. His parents had died, he had had to fight off death more than once, but Petunia thought of those events only in terms of how they affected her and her family. Never would it occur to her to think about the toll those events had had on Harry. He shook his head in wonder. I hope I never become like that, he thought.

"Of course it's not, Petunia," he heard Vernon say. "That's all most people want. But you know what they say, you can choose your friends, but not your relatives." He paused. "We've done the best we could. We tried to beat the magic out of him, for his own good. We failed, but we tried. And who knows, maybe it wasn't for nothing. If Dudley's right about him having courage, maybe it was because we were strict with him, and it made him find some strength that he didn't know he had. I wouldn't be surprised."

Harry was aghast. First of all, he thought 'mean' was a more apt word than 'strict' to describe how the Dursleys had been with him. Secondly, the idea that Vernon would give himself and Petunia credit for whatever courage he had struck Harry as ludicrous as well as self-serving. Can they really tell themselves that, Harry thought? Can they really believe it? He wondered how far the capacity of people to fool themselves could go.

There was another short period of silence. Then Vernon asked, "Petunia, how long until dinner?"

"Forty-five minutes. Why?"

"I thought maybe you could pop down to the bakery and get a cake." He paused. "Celebrate Dudley's victory."

Harry imagined the suspicious look on her face. "This isn't because it's his birthday, is it?" she asked, meaning Harry.

"We don't have to say it is," Vernon replied. "We just felt like having some cake, and it was on sale. There doesn't have to be another reason."

"He wouldn't even have had to help Dudley if he didn't go to that awful school in the first place," pouted Petunia.

"Very true," conceded Vernon. "But Dudley reckons Harry did the right thing by him, and that's worth something." Another pause. "You don't have to, you know," he said, referring to the cake. "Just a thought."

There was silence for another minute. Then Harry heard the jostling of items in a purse. Petunia said, "I'll see what they have left. Should be about fifteen or twenty minutes." Harry heard the front door close, the car door open and close, and the car leave.

Harry collected the Extendable Ears and lay on his bed, exhaling loudly. He then looked up to see Hedwig in her cage; he'd been so focused since he got home that he hadn't even noticed her. "Come here, Hedwig," he said, grabbing an Owl Treat and holding out his arm. Hedwig flew down, took the treat, and settled on his arm.

Harry needed to talk, and Hedwig was his only audience. "Why is it so hard for them, Hedwig? For the first time in fifteen years, they want to do some small nice thing for me, and they can't even bring themselves to admit that they're doing it? Would it be so hard for them to just say, 'Happy Birthday, Harry'? Are they afraid it would mean they were admitting they were wrong all these years of being awful to me? What is their problem?"

Hedwig looked at him in such a way as to unmistakably convey the concept of, 'I'd really like another Owl Treat.' Harry rolled his eyes. "You're such a good listener, Hedwig," he said, sarcastically but affectionately, as he reached for another Owl Treat. "I knew you'd understand."

Left to his own devices to ponder the Dursleys' attitude toward him, Harry mused and mentally drifted for awhile, petting Hedwig on and off. He heard the car return, but had no urge to deploy the Extendable Ears again. He felt he'd heard enough.

Harry went downstairs when dinner was announced. He normally said nothing during dinner, and didn't tonight, but felt the atmosphere around the table to be less oppressive than usual. Vernon talked about his job, how the company was doing so well

that they might be hiring soon. "Good, honest work, beats the heck out of the dole, that's what I say!" After many such dinners, Harry was extremely familiar with Vernon's political, economic, and social opinions. Harry wasn't sure that he had any opinions at all on those topics, but he had a feeling that if he was compelled to come up with some quickly, the direct opposite of Vernon's probably wouldn't be a bad place to start. Harry imagined himself sitting at a dinner table, saying "More people on the dole, that's what I say!" He chuckled inwardly.

Petunia brought out the cake she'd bought. It looked very nice; chocolate with chocolate frosting. "And now, a little dessert," she said. She started cutting it.

Dudley said, "Oh, yeah, today's your birthday, isn't it, Harry?" Petunia and Vernon looked a bit startled, as though someone had aired a distasteful secret. Harry was surprised himself.

"Yes, it is," Harry said.

"Right, erm, so it is," Vernon said uncomfortably. "Happy Birthday."

"Thanks," Harry said.

"Well, maybe Malfoy and his pals were just wishing you a happy birthday," joked Dudley.

Harry chuckled as he accepted a piece of cake from Petunia, who he thanked. "Don't think so," he said. "They forgot to bring any presents, anyway."

"Did you get presents?" Dudley asked.

"Yeah, a bunch, this morning," Harry said. Seeing Petunia's dark look, Harry added, "You know, I'm really sorry about those owls, there wasn't anything I could do. It's hard to make an owl leave if it doesn't want to." Petunia looked angry but didn't say anything. At Dudley and Vernon's blank looks, Harry briefly explained what happened when the owls delivered his presents.

"Bloody owls," muttered Vernon.

"You must have a lot of friends, then?" Dudley asked

"Yeah, I do," Harry said. He paused thoughtfully. "I'm pretty lucky, actually."

"Speaking of friends, what's happening with your friends, Dudley?" Petunia asked brightly. "Anything new?"

It was abundantly clear that Petunia had asked the question in order to deliberately steer the conversation away from Harry's friends and his world. Harry was annoyed for just a second, then he realized that he was at the table with the Dursleys, on his birthday, eating cake and talking. Compared to what was normal, that was quite amazing in itself.

The conversation drifted around the more usual topics as they ate their cake. Petunia offered everyone seconds, including Harry, and everyone accepted.

Near the end of the second piece, during a conversational lull, Dudley said, "Hey, Harry..."

Harry looked up.

"When you're back at school, the next time you see Malfoy... tell him I said 'hello,'" said Dudley, grinning evilly.

Harry burst out laughing. Dudley started laughing too. Vernon looked concerned; Petunia, positively alarmed. "I'd be very happy to," said Harry between laughs.

"I'm really not sure that's a good idea," said Petunia. "Didn't you say he threatened both of you? Do you really want him coming after you?" she asked Dudley.

"He's going to come after me, for sure," Harry answered, "but I can defend myself if I have to. He's not going to come after Dudley."

"Can you be sure of that?" Petunia demanded.

"There are serious laws about this kind of thing," Harry responded. "He's already in trouble for what he's done today. He could get expelled from school. At the very least he'll get a warning. He'll be up on three charges: use of magic as an underage wizard, Disapparating without a license and underage, and use of magic against a Muggle, er, sorry, non-magical person. All of those are against the law."

"But won't he say that he was just defending himself? Look at what Dudley did to his friends, after all." Harry realized that, at least to some extent, Petunia knew what she was talking about.

"If he claimed that he was just defending himself, he'd be laughed at. First, he came to Privet Drive, looking for me. It'll be obvious that he was looking for revenge, since I helped send his father to prison. Secondly, he--"

All three Dursleys said "What?" simultaneously. "His father's in prison? You helped catch him? How in the world...?" asked Dudley.

"Well, it's a pretty long story, too long to tell here, but here's the very short version. You remember that really bad wizard Voldemort who gave me this scar?" The Dursleys all nodded. "A month ago, his helpers tried to trap me in a part of the Ministry of Magic, in London. A lot of my friends came to help me, and they caught some of his helpers. Malfoy's dad is one of those who got caught; he's one of Voldemort's most prominent assistants. Now he's in jail, so Malfoy'd like to take it out of my hide. But like I said, I can take care of myself."

"Now, let me get this straight," said Petunia with wide eyes. "Voldemort's the one who, in addition to killing my sister and her husband, killed dozens of people."

"Yes," Harry said.

"Both wizards and ordinary people," she continued.

"Mostly wizards, but yes," he said.

"And this Malfoy's father is one of his chief lieutenants."

"Yes."

"Are you CRAZY??" she screamed at Harry. "You will, under NO circumstances, EVER so much as mention Dudley's name to him again! If he asks about Dudley, you will say that he was killed in a traffic accident! Is that CLEAR??"

"Mum!" Dudley said indignantly. "I'm not going to let this riffraff push me around! You should have heard how he talked to me, not even knowing who I was! He acted like some kind of king or something! I'm not going to take that!"

"You didn't, Dudley," his father interjected. "You stood up for yourself, and we're proud of you. But what your mother is saying is just not to wave a red flag in the face of an angry bull. Let's not go out of our way to stir up people who kill."

"And not just who kill," continued Petunia, who Harry could see was still in quite a state, "but think about why they kill. Tell us why they bother to kill ordinary people, Harry."

He could tell she knew the answer, but he gave it anyway. "For fun," he said solemnly.

"Yes, that is exactly what James told my sister. They kill ordinary people FOR FUN," she shouted. "And if they become more powerful, and can violate the wizards' laws with some impunity-and I know they did before-and they're trying to think of what non-magical people they'd like to kill FOR FUN, don't you think it's possible that the boy who humiliated the son of one of their most important leaders will spring to mind?"

"Even though I'm Harry's cousin?" Dudley asked, surprised.

"Unfortunately, Dudley, that would make them want to all the more." To Dudley's surprised look, Harry continued: "See, Voldemort almost died when he tried to kill me. That's why I'm so famous in my world. No one had ever survived a killing curse before."

"Hold on a second," said Petunia, all of her normal revulsion about things magical gone in the face of a possible threat to Dudley. "How did you survive, anyway? If that curse always kills?"

"I only found that out a couple of years ago myself," said Harry. "For a long time, no one knew. Voldemort came to my parents' house not especially intending to kill my mother, just my father and me. He killed my father, and came for me. My mother stood between him and me. Even though she knew he would kill her, she wouldn't move. He killed her, but in giving her life for mine, she activated an extremely rare magic. If you give your life for someone you love, it gives them magical protection against the person who killed you. The more you loved them, the

stronger the protection is. The protection my mother gave me was strong enough to stop the most deadly curse there is, done by the most powerful dark wizard in centuries." Harry paused, feeling emotion rise up. "She literally gave her life to protect me. She was incredibly brave."

Petunia spoke to Harry in a surprisingly gentle voice, gentler than he'd ever heard her use. "I think that most mothers would like to think that they would do the same thing in that situation," she said, her eyes flicking over to Dudley for an instant as she spoke.

Harry nodded. "Probably. But very few are put in a position to do it. Unfortunately, mine was. It's not easy, knowing she had to die so I could live."

Vernon spoke up. "But then, why is it you who's famous? Why not her?"

"I think it should be her, too. She deserves it. Me? I didn't do anything. I was just a baby. But they didn't know why I had survived, so she couldn't be recognized for what she had done. I was the one who survived, and to their eyes, caused Voldemort's disappearance. My name became a symbol of victory over Voldemort. Even my scar became famous. People recognize me in public because of it. So I never did anything to deserve being famous, but life's strange like that sometimes."

After a short silence, Petunia said, "And so now that Voldemort's back, he and his friends may come after you."

Harry almost chuckled. "They already have," he said. "He's tried to kill me twice, and so have his supporters. Whoever kills me gets big points with him, so they're lining up for the chance."

Vernon looked at him sternly. "You almost sound like you don't care," he observed, "or take it very seriously."

Harry met Vernon's eyes. "I do care. I don't know... I guess it's what's called gallows humor. When you've looked death in the face as many times as I have, you get kind of a different perspective on it. But I think another reason I'm not petrified all the time is that my school's headmaster, Albus Dumbledore," he said, glancing at Petunia with the understanding that she at least knew who he was talking about, "is an extremely powerful wizard and has me very well protected. So, generally, it's not like I could die any second. I'm mostly okay as long as I don't do anything stupid."

"You mean like sticking a finger in the eye of the son of a powerful wizard who has a grudge against you?" Petunia asked tartly.

"Well, that's a good point," Harry admitted, "so let's get back to Dudley's situation. I honestly think it's highly unlikely, very highly unlikely, that anyone's going to come after him. First, as I said, Malfoy's father's in jail. Second, avenging something like this would be way, way down their list of priorities. Third, Malfoy's in

trouble himself, and will end up in jail soon if he doesn't step very carefully. He's still in school, too, so he can't really come here then, either. All in all, I think Dudley's got a better chance of being knocked off by a drunk driver than by Malfoy or his dad's crowd."

"Even if that's true," Petunia said, "The current situation could change, the dark wizards could become more powerful, and they would have more time and opportunity for acts of vengeance. Are you saying that's impossible?"

Harry was impressed by her grasp of the situation. "No," he was forced to admit. "It could happen."

"And so," she pressed him, "what do you think is the best thing to do in this situation, Harry?" She appeared surprisingly calm, but he was fairly sure she wasn't.

Harry frowned. "Sorry, Dudley, but really, she's right. For sure, I shouldn't taunt him by reminding him of you, fun as that would be, and the really safe thing to do is what she suggested, tell him you died somehow. He'll laugh over it and forget that you ever existed, which would be a good thing."

Dudley frowned as well. "I really don't like the sound of that. It's too much like running away. I don't run away from cowards who threaten me."

Vernon turned to face his son. "Look, Dud, I know how you feel, and that's a good attitude. I'd feel that way if I were you. But there are times when we don't want to do something, but we do it because the people who care about us will be happier. So, the question is, would you rather gloat in the face of someone you've already beaten, or would you rather save your mother hours of worry?"

Harry was amazed that Vernon was able to put it that way, so that even Dudley could get past his pride. Dudley sighed. "Oh, all right," he said.

Vernon slapped Dudley's arm. "Attaboy," he said. "I know it's not easy, but it's the right thing to do."

"I'm still not happy about the danger he's in now, even if you say it's very little," Petunia said to Harry. "Tell me something: When Dudley turned that corner and you saw him, why didn't you tell him to turn around and go away so he wouldn't be involved?"

Harry smiled; Dudley laughed out loud. "That's easy," Harry said. "Dudley, what would you have done if I'd told you to turn around and go away?"

"I would've asked who you thought you were telling me what to do, and gone ahead," Dudley answered.

Harry glanced at Petunia. "And anyway, he spoke before I saw him; my back was to him. It was way too late."

"I didn't exactly know that his life was so dangerous," Dudley admitted, "but I would've done the same thing anyway. Malfoy told me to go away, and well, there was absolutely no way I was going to do that."

Petunia looked at Dudley imploringly. "I wish you would try to change that attitude when it comes to things or people that Harry's involved with," she half-scolded, half-pleaded. "Your life could be at stake. I've already lost one family member to that world. I don't want to lose any more."

Dudley stared ahead and nodded, not saying anything. Harry wondered if the realistic thought of his death had taken the edge off of Dudley's naturally aggressive attitude. After a pause, he asked Harry, "How many times has your life been in danger, anyway? I mean, like if you take one wrong step or lower your guard you'd snuff it?"

It was an interesting question; Harry had never thought of it like that. "Hang on, let me think," he said. He started using his fingers to count as he recollected.

Vernon was taken aback. "If you have to count them because there's been so many, that's really not a good sign," he commented.

"You're not wrong," muttered Harry as he counted. Finishing, he said, "I count seven," he said. "Oh, wait, eight if you count the dementors from last year."

"You're bloody right I'd count them," exclaimed Dudley. "Those things were horrible. You mean you've had to deal with worse than them?"

"Well, Voldemort was worse, but most of the others were not so much worse as different," Harry explained. "Dementors give you this feeling of hopelessness; they make you relive your worst memories." Harry saw Dudley give an involuntary shudder. "Other things that have almost killed me, like the basilisk or the giant spider, don't do that, but they'll kill you just as quick."

"Giant spider!?" Dudley was goggle-eyed.

"I think that's enough of this sort of talk for now," said Petunia.

Either Vernon didn't hear her or ignored her. "Giant spiders and basilisks? Is that the sort of thing your school lets roam around the grounds?"

"Of course not," Harry said. "The spider was someplace students aren't supposed to go. If I'd known it was there I wouldn't have gone. The basilisk nobody knew was there, it was living under the school for years. Those are very unusual cases."

"Which seem to happen to you very frequently," Vernon pointed out.

"My friends have mentioned that too," agreed Harry. "Usually I don't go looking for trouble, though, it just finds me. Because I represent a huge turning point in recent wizard history, I end up being involved in all sorts of stuff that doesn't happen to most wizards. It's been a very weird life."

"Told you all along you'd have been better off not going to that place," Vernon said.

"But there's lots of good things about it too," Harry protested. "I don't mean being famous, I'd rather not have that. But I have good friends, and the Weasleys, the red-haired ones, think of me as part of their family. I wouldn't give that up for anything."

With an air of ending the discussion, Petunia said, "Well, if I have anything to say about it, nothing more like this will happen on Privet Drive, at least."

"No argument from me there," agreed Harry. "That was really good cake, by the way." Dudley and Vernon quickly agreed.

"Let's see what's on the telly," Vernon said. Dudley followed him into the living room. Harry got up to go to his room. Before he could, he heard Petunia say "Harry," quietly enough that Vernon and Dudley couldn't hear her.

"Yes?"

"When you go to your room, if your owl is still there, close your window. I don't want her going out."

"But Aunt Petunia, she-" Harry started to protest, but she cut him off.

"Just for tonight," she said, and Harry was surprised to hear it sound more like a request than an order. He nodded and went upstairs.

Hedwig was indeed still there, so he went over to the window and closed it. Hedwig saw and let out an annoyed hoot.

"Sorry, Hedwig, it's just for tonight."

He lay back on the bed, confused and full of cake. He had given the Dursleys far more information about the magical world than they ever would have tolerated before, and Dudley had gone from treating him as a freak and an annoyance to a respected equal, just like that. Was he really that impressed with what I did this afternoon? Harry asked himself. Dudley had seemed positively intrigued by hearing about Harry's danger-laden life. Vernon was treating Harry better because, Harry assumed, of Dudley's endorsement of Harry's actions after the confrontation with Malfoy. Petunia, on the other hand... her tolerance had to be due to the fact that their ignorance of the situation in the magical world could have led to life-threatening consequences for Dudley. Harry now kicked himself for having been willing to use Dudley to rub Malfoy's nose in today's events; he was just so used to dealing with Malfoy that it never occurred to him that Dudley could be in any danger. It wasn't as though he liked the Dursleys, but he didn't want any harm coming to them, either, especially because of him. Enough people ended up in danger, or dead, because of their connection to him.

After contemplating the evening's events for a while, Harry got out the Omni-view and watched some Quidditch. It reminded him of how pleased he would be to be playing again this year. A half-hour later, he put it down and picked up the new book from Hermione. He had read a little last night, but now that he knew he was going to be teaching, it seemed far more immediate and relevant. He also realized that despite the nasty shock and great anxiety he'd gotten when he learned he'd be made a teacher, he hadn't thought about it for the past few hours, since he'd run into Malfoy. Nothing like a new crisis to make you forget about the old one, he thought.

An hour or so later, there was a knock on his door. Harry said "Come in," and Petunia walked in, wearing her nightclothes and holding a letter.

Obviously uncomfortable, Petunia said, "I need to use your owl. I need to send this to Professor Dumbledore."

This is almost too much, Harry thought. What's she going to do next, send away for a Kwikspell course? "You want to use owl post?" he asked incredulously.

Petunia sighed impatiently and gave him a 'don't be stupid' look. "No, I don't want to, but I have to if I want him to get this promptly. I know how to send things to the school through the post, it just takes too long. This is important, or I wouldn't be doing it."

Harry was slightly abashed; this was obvious now that she mentioned it. "Sorry, I was just surprised. Sure, I'll send it, no problem." He reached for the envelope.

She hung onto it. "How should I address it?"

"You don't even have to; she'll know where to deliver it, no matter where he is," explained Harry. "But you can put his name on the outside. A lot of people do."

Petunia produced a pen and prepared to write on the envelope. "His first name is Albus," he said helpfully.

"Who would name their child 'Albus,'" Petunia muttered as she wrote his name on the envelope. He refrained from comment. She sealed the envelope and handed it to Harry.

He took it, walked over to the cage, and took out Hedwig. "Got a bit of a special delivery for you, Hedwig," he said to the owl. He tied the letter to her leg and opened the window. "See you soon," he said as she flew outside.

"I asked him to respond to you, not me. I don't need an owl flying at me while I'm cooking or doing laundry," Petunia said with the air of one who did not want to lower herself.

"I understand," Harry said. "I'll give it to you when I get it."

Petunia nodded, but did not leave. She stared at Harry for a moment, then suddenly said, "How could you agree to use Dudley to taunt that boy? How could you endanger him like that? Dudley couldn't know what he was getting into, but you should have! What were you thinking?"

Harry looked glum and nodded. This was the first time Petunia had ever yelled at him for something he actually deserved it for. "I wasn't thinking, is the truth," he admitted. "It just never occurred to me. I'm just so used to dealing with Malfoy that I didn't stop to think of the fact that he could come after Dudley when I'm not around to help out, or his dad's friends could in the future. But I would never deliberately endanger Dudley, or anyone in this house." He hoped she would believe him.

She looked at him as though not knowing what to believe, and was silent for a minute. Finally she said, "It seems as though there's a lot that you don't intend for to happen that happens anyway." Harry said nothing. Petunia paused for a few seconds, and said, "Dudley's my only child. If anything were to happen to him..."

"I'll do everything in my power to make sure it doesn't," Harry promised. "So will Professor Dumbledore. I assume this is what the letter was about?"

She nodded. "He gave you to us, he put us in this danger. The least he can do is make sure we don't suffer because of it."

"He will," Harry assured her. "He's the most powerful wizard in the world, even more powerful than Voldemort. And he's a very kind person. He'll help."

"And you'll be more careful about what you say in the future," she said. It was more a statement than a question.

"I will," he said quietly. She nodded and left.

Harry shook his head at himself again. He still thought the chances of anything happening to Dudley were extremely low, but he knew she had a right to be concerned. He wondered what Dumbledore would do.

He suddenly felt very tired. He put away the book, got into bed and turned off the light. Thoughts jumbled in his head.

He was going to be a teacher. Malfoy had appeared on Privet Drive. Dudley wanted a Skiing Snackbox. The Dursleys had given him birthday cake and asked him questions about the magical world. Aunt Petunia had sent a letter by owl post.

It had been a strange, strange day.

Chapter 4

The Dursleys' Guest

The next day seemed like it might be more usual, but Harry realized that somehow the Dursleys were more comfortable, or at least less uncomfortable, with him. The way they reacted to him downstairs in the morning reflected that he was still not being treated like a member of the family would be, but not badly either. It was a pleasant development; Harry hoped it would last.

Dudley was on the phone with one of his friends for forty-five minutes at about noon. Just after he hung up, the phone rang again. Harry was in the living room and heard Dudley answer.

"Hello? Yeah, he is. Who is this?" Dudley called to Harry, "It's Hermione. One of your friends?" Harry walked toward the phone and nodded.

Dudley didn't give him the phone immediately. Into the phone, he said, "Yeah, okay, he's coming to the phone. This is his cousin, Dudley. Listen, we were talking last night, and I wanted to ask you something. How many times do you reckon Harry's almost been killed?"

Harry rolled his eyes. Petunia, just walking into the kitchen, was less amused. "Dudley!" she said sharply.

Dudley's eyebrows went up, and he covered the phone with his hand. "She's counting," he said.

"Well, it's not a number we have at the top of our heads, or anything," Harry pointed out.

"Mmm hmmm..." Dudley was saying into the phone. "...yeah, I was there for that one...Voldemort, Barty Crouch..." Dudley was repeating them to let Harry know what Hermione was saying. She was obviously going in reverse chronological order. "A dragon?" Dudley said, his eyes wide. Harry said, "I didn't count the dragon. I don't think my life was really in danger."

"He says he didn't count the dragon," Dudley said to Hermione. He listened for a minute. Covering the phone again, he said to Harry, "She says you were plenty worried about being mauled, and with good reason, so she counts it."

Suddenly Dudley burst out with, "A hundred dementors??" He looked at Harry in disbelief.

Harry shrugged. "You do what you have to do to stay alive," he said. Petunia looked on disapprovingly, but said nothing. Dudley's jaw dropped. Harry thought, if I didn't have his respect before, I do now. He doesn't know what Voldemort's like, but a hundred dementors, that he can understand.

Dudley continued listening and commenting. "Basilisk, spider, uh huh, he mentioned those... Voldemort again... that guy's pretty persistent, isn't he... uh huh... squirrel?... oh, Quirrell... yeah, that would be pretty strange...mmm hmmm... troll..."

Harry snapped his fingers. "I forgot about the troll."

Dudley relayed this to Hermione. He listened for a minute, then chuckled. "He could only think of eight...well, give him a break, it must be hard for him to keep it all straight... okay, thanks, I'll give him to you."

Dudley covered the phone. "She counts ten, including the dragon and the troll. She's upset with you for forgetting the troll. 'How could he forget that, he and Ron saved my life!'" he said, quoting Hermione and smiling, greatly amused. He handed the phone to Harry, and walked away shaking his head. Petunia watched him go with concern in her eyes. Harry saw him sit down in the living room in a place from which he could hear Harry's half of the phone call. He's getting pretty interested in this, Harry thought.

Harry put the phone to his mouth. "Hi, Hermione."

"Hi, Harry. How could you forget the troll?"

"Well, c'mon," he said defensively, "like Dudley said, it's a lot to keep straight."

"I know, I'm just teasing you. Why is he suddenly asking about what you've done at Hogwarts? I thought they didn't want you talking about that."

"Well, it's a long story. On my way home yesterday, Malfoy and his pals were waiting for me on Privet Drive."

"No!" she said, shocked. "I knew he was upset at you, but I never thought he'd do that. I assume he wanted Crabbe and Goyle to rough you up?"

"That was the idea," he confirmed. "Either get beaten up, or use magic and take my chances with the Ministry. I would've used magic, of course, but before it got to that, Dudley happened by. Malfoy started right in on him, you know how he is about Muggles. Well, big mistake. Malfoy wouldn't back off, and Dudley made short work of Crabbe and Goyle. Less than two minutes, they're both on the ground, not getting up. He made them look like a couple of weak ten-year-olds."

"Pretty much what they were," Dudley muttered from the other room.

"So, now Malfoy's in the same boat he wanted me in," Harry continued. "Dudley gave him a chance to apologize and run away, but you know Malfoy. I had to block a few spells, and when Malfoy realized there was no getting away from Dudley, he Disapparated."

"Disapparated?" Hermione asked, shocked again. "But he can't, he's not old enough! He's going to be in such trouble!"

"Tell me about it. Now we're going to see just how much good his family connections are, with his father in custody. He should be expelled, but first offense, he'll probably get probation and a warning."

"He deserves worse," Hermione said fervently. "What's really bad is, he probably won't get punished at all for coming to your street to assault you. It does seem like there's no justice sometimes."

"I'm not holding my breath," Harry agreed. "Anyway, I'll tell you all the details the next time I see you."

"Which I hope will be soon, which is why I'm calling," she said. "I want you guys to visit me, over here at my place. You and Ron and Ginny. We could have dinner, talk, watch a movie, stay up late. It would be fun. What do you think?"

"Yeah, that sounds great!" Harry said. "I'd love to see your place and do all that." He paused. "But what about transportation? How would I get there? Or Ron and Ginny, for that matter?"

"Mr. Weasley has hooked up our fireplace to the Floo network," she said. "The Weasleys could come straight from the Burrow, and you could come from Mrs. Figg's house, if she's around and agrees. That could work."

"Yes, it could," Harry agreed. "Have you asked the Weasleys about it yet?"

"No, I was waiting for you, to see if you wanted to first," she said. "I'll ask them as soon as I get off the phone with you. I was thinking of tomorrow night. How would that be?"

"That would be great. Listen, this just occurred to me, but... what would you think about inviting Neville, if it wouldn't be too many people? I mean, we don't have to, but I just thought it might be a nice thing to do," Harry suggested.

"Yes, that would be good," she agreed. "It's nice of you to think of that. It's not like he has tons of friends, at least that I know of. I'll ask Ron and Ginny what they think, and if it's okay with them, then I will."

"Sounds good. I assume they don't have phones, so you'll communicate with them through their fireplaces? Owls would take too long, I guess."

In the background, Harry heard Dudley mutter, "Communicate through the fireplace?"

Hermione said, "Yes, there's not enough time for owls," she agreed. "I'm thinking of around four or five in the afternoon."

"My schedule is pretty free," Harry joked. "So, get back to me after you've arranged it, and tell me the details. It sounds great."

"I'm glad, Harry. I thought I'd rent Star Wars for the movie. You'll have seen it, of course, but the others won't have. A Muggle science fiction movie should be really interesting for them."

"I'd think so, but I haven't seen it, either," Harry said.

"You haven't seen Star Wars?" she asked, in great surprise. "How did you manage that?"

"Well, if you think about it for a minute..." he prompted her.

"You mean they wouldn't let you watch it because it was too similar to magic? That's amazing!"

"Amazing but true," Harry said. "So, that'll be good, too. I guess I should go, and let you make the arrangements.

"Okay, I'll probably call you later. Bye."

Harry said goodbye and hung up. It felt good to be able to talk to someone else on the phone and make arrangements to socialize, pleasures he had never enjoyed at the Dursleys' before. He wasn't going to go so far as to ask the Dursleys to open up the fireplace and allow it to be connected to the Floo network; he thought that would be pushing it.

"Hey, Harry," Dudley said from the living room. "She wasn't really upset at you, was she?"

"Nah," Harry said casually. "She was just having a bit of fun with me, like you were. She called to invite me and some other friends over to her place for the evening, tomorrow night. I'm really looking forward to it."

"Big old magic convention, eh? Will the toads in the neighborhood be safe?" Dudley joked.

"Pretty safe, since we're not allowed to do magic during vacation," said an amused Harry, wondering what Dudley imagined wizards did when they got together.

"Where does she live?" Petunia asked.

"You know, I'm not sure," Harry answered. "I guess I'll find out when she calls back to confirm everything."

"Good to see you're not getting bogged down in trivial details," Petunia observed. Harry was surprised; he didn't know quite how to take that. If she was being sarcastic, it was not something he'd seen her do much, if at all. He didn't know how to answer, so he didn't, and went upstairs.

It was about three in the afternoon when Hedwig flew in through Harry's bedroom window. He took the letter off her leg and petted her; she nuzzled his hand for a second and flew up to her perch.

Harry looked at the letter. It was sealed, and simply said "To Petunia Dursley, via Harry Potter." Harry would have loved to know what was in it, but knew better than to open it, or even ask Petunia. He took it downstairs, found Petunia in the kitchen, and gave it to her.

"Thank you, Harry," she said politely, and opened the letter. Harry wandered into the living room. He didn't want to press her, but he wanted to be nearby in case she wanted to ask or tell him anything.

She didn't for a short time, but ten minutes later she came into the living room and sat down on the sofa next to Dudley, opposite Harry.

"He says he wants to come by fireplace. Is that the same thing as that man tried to do two years ago?"

Harry told them it was, and explained about the Floo network and that it was such a basic mode of transportation for wizards that Mr. Weasley simply hadn't stopped to consider that a fireplace might be boarded up. "All you have to do is make sure that the fireplace is open," Harry summed up.

"Seems like kind of a weird way to travel," Dudley observed.

"Tell me what about their world isn't weird," Petunia muttered.

"Yeah, I thought so at first, too," said Harry, responding to Dudley's comment. "Walking into a fire isn't something you'd think of doing. But you get used to it, and it's really convenient. It doesn't matter how far away someone is."

"Is it worldwide? Think of all the money you could save on airfare," Dudley pointed out.

Harry looked thoughtful. "That's a good point. I don't know; I've never asked. I've never had to go outside England."

"Then why do you have to take that train every year?" Dudley asked. "Why don't you just go like this?"

Harry almost started his answer with the word 'Hogwarts,' but that word had been forbidden by the Dursleys for so long that it was a habit to avoid it. "Another good point. My school is isolated, I think for security reasons. The train, roads, and flying are the only ways to get there. The school has fireplaces, but only for communication, not for transportation."

"For a minute, I thought you were going to say, 'only for fires,' but I should have known better," Petunia said dryly.

"Yes, that would be too obvious," Harry agreed, going along with the joke. At least she's not recoiling in horror from all this, he thought. "They are used for fires, too, though. There's one in the common room of our House at school. People like to sit around it and study in the winter."

"He's coming at 7:30," said Petunia. "Dinner will be at 6:30, so we'll be ready when he gets here."

"Who's coming, anyway?" Dudley asked.

"Professor Dumbledore, the headmaster of my school," said Harry.

"Why's he coming?"

Harry looked at Petunia, silently saying, it's not for me to tell him, this is your business. Petunia nodded in acknowledgment, then said to Dudley, "He's coming to discuss security arrangements."

"Security? For Harry?"

"No, Dudley," said his mother. "For you."

"For me??" Dudley sounded outraged. "I don't need that! I can take care of myself!"

"No, you can't, Dudley!" his mother exclaimed, frustrated. "You tell him, Harry."

Harry looked at Dudley with a serious expression. "I can understand that this is annoying, Dudley, because you're more than capable of defending yourself against other non-magical people." Harry thought that sugar-coating this with a little flattery would help the message go down, and besides, it was true. "You're not used to the idea of needing protection. It sounds insulting. Believe me, I know. But it's a totally different situation with wizards. You'd simply have no way to defend yourself. It has nothing to do with how strong or brave or capable you are. It wouldn't even matter if you had a gun in your hand. A wizard could whisk it away, just like that. I know that stinks, but it's just a fact."

Dudley gave Harry an angry look, but Harry knew Dudley was angry at the situation, not him personally. In a sulky way, Dudley said, "I wish I could do magic, then I could defend myself."

"Dudley!!" Petunia nearly screamed. "Don't you ever say that! Don't even think it! Didn't you hear what goes on in that world? You don't think it's a bad thing that Harry's almost been killed however many times? A lot of wizards get killed when this Voldemort is around, and they can defend themselves, but not against him! You don't know what death is, Dudley! You've never seen it! But I bet Harry has!"

Dudley looked at Harry questioningly.

Somberly, Harry nodded. "A little over a year ago, in a school competition, another student and I got caught in a trap, which one of Voldemort's helpers set for me so Voldemort could return to full strength. The other student getting caught was an accident, just by chance. They needed me, but not him. A Voldemort helper raised his wand, and bam, the other student was dead, just like that. Right in front of my eyes. And he was good with a wand, too. At least as good as me, maybe better. Didn't do him any good."

Dudley was silent for a minute. Then he asked, "This was Cedric?"

Harry nodded, remembering that Dudley had overheard him saying Cedric's name in nightmares a year ago. "Now, I choose to be part of the magical world. I feel like I belong there, I feel at home, even though I know I'm at high risk all the time. But I can really understand why your mother doesn't like it, why she wants you nowhere near it. Most of the time, it's fairly peaceful. When Voldemort is around, as he is now, it's very dangerous, especially for anyone with a connection to me. But she

got stuck with me. She just doesn't want you to have to suffer for it. Cedric died for no other reason than that he happened to be around me at the wrong time."

Dudley thought for a minute; Harry could see Petunia watching Dudley and hoping he would understand the danger. "But you're in all this danger, but you don't need anyone protecting you, right?" Dudley asked.

Harry shook his head. "No, I do, actually. I'm safe at school and I'm safe in this house. Anyplace else, someone is following me all the time. Professor Dumbledore started making sure I was protected twenty-four hours a day after Voldemort came back last year. I'm not thrilled with it, but I understand the need for it. But you see, Dudley, I can take care of myself against someone my own age, like Malfoy, or an adult wizard who isn't that good. But Voldemort's henchmen are highly trained, skilled, and will use very deadly spells with no hesitation. I probably couldn't defeat one of them, never mind two or three. That's why I need protection."

Dudley pondered this. "Yeah, but you're like Public Enemy No. 1 to these people, but they're barely aware of me. I'm not going to need someone following me."

"No, you're not," Harry agreed. He doubted that the Order could spare the manpower to have Dudley followed anyway. "I think that Aunt Petunia just wants to hear how much risk Professor Dumbledore thinks there is in this situation, and to know about what precautions might be a good idea." He looked at Petunia.

"Yes, that's about right," she said. She turned to Dudley. "Dudley, please, help me with this. Whatever we end up doing, it probably won't work without your cooperation. Please keep an open mind about whatever we decide. Will you do that for me?"

"Okay," Dudley said, "but I don't want to just hear about it after you're done talking to him. I want to be there, I want to be able to ask him questions. It's my life we're talking about. If I can do that, I'll keep an open mind."

Seeing Petunia's indecisive expression, Harry assumed that she hadn't planned on including Dudley in this meeting. "I think Professor Dumbledore would want Dudley in the meeting anyway," Harry said. "Probably it's best if we're all there."

"Very well," Petunia said. She got up and left the room.

They ate at 6:30 as Petunia planned; she was nothing if not punctual. As she finished the dinner dishes, 7:30 was approaching. Harry could tell that their attitude was different from when they had waited for the arrival of Mr. Weasley two years ago; for one thing, the Dursleys were wearing their normal weekend clothes, not their Sunday best they'd worn hoping to intimidate Mr. Weasley. Not that Dumbledore would be intimidated no matter what they wore, Harry thought. He couldn't imagine what could intimidate Dumbledore. There had to be nothing that could, since he had

seen with his own eyes that even Voldemort could not; in fact, it was the other way around.

The three Dursleys and Harry stood in the living room at 7:28. Harry looked at the open fireplace and wondered why Dumbledore had made this particular request when he could have easily Apparated.

Vernon looked at Harry suspiciously. "Is he going to be on time?" Harry knew that Vernon placed a high value on punctuality.

"Let's put it this way," Harry said. "If your watch says 7:30 and he's not here, it probably means your watch is wrong." Harry silently hoped he was right.

Vernon grunted. "It's got exactly the right time, I called the number to check before dinner." Why am I not surprised, Harry thought. He wants to be able to call Dumbledore on being late, even if it's by only a minute or two.

"In fact, it's coming up on 7:30 now," Vernon announced. He counted down the seconds remaining. "Three... two... one..."

There was a sudden, small explosion, or burst of flame, in the fireplace, and out of the fire walked Albus Dumbledore, wearing his usual wizard robes and hat. He surveyed those gathered to meet him.

Vernon stepped forward with a twinge of anxiety. "A pleasure to meet you, Professor Dumbledore. I'm Vernon Dursley. My wife, Petunia," he said, gesturing to Petunia, who also seemed to fighting down anxiety while putting on a polite face. "My son, Dudley," he continued. Dudley was gaping at Dumbledore; Dumbledore's whole appearance, especially the robes and beard, was very odd indeed to Dudley's eyes. "And of course you know Harry," Vernon concluded.

"Very well indeed," Dumbledore said, with a wink for Harry. "I'm very pleased to finally meet you all," he said, shaking hands with each Dursley in turn, to Vernon's surprise. "It is most unfortunate that it must be under such circumstances as this."

It would never have happened under any other circumstances, Harry thought; only desperation drove Petunia to seek his help. He wondered if Dumbledore understood this and that his comment had been deliberately ironic.

"Yes, it is," agreed Vernon. "Please, sit down." Dumbledore sat in the recliner Vernon gestured him towards, the one that was usually Vernon's exclusively. The Dursleys sat on the sofa; Harry, in another chair.

"If I may," Dumbledore began, "I would like to first apologize for the fact that you are in this situation. It is the sincere wish of the magical community that Muggles be undisturbed and unmolested by magic. Some of our most serious laws enforce this desire. It is only at times like this, when the dark forces of magic have a strong unifying force, that it becomes difficult to enforce our laws as we would like. I deeply regret that you should have to be present at such a time."

"And that you are responsible for our harboring the boy who these dark forces, who don't care much about collateral damage, would like nothing better than to kill?" asked Petunia. It seemed to Harry that she had never quite forgiven Dumbledore for leaving him on her doorstep. "Surely you foresaw that we could be dragged into these events."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, I deeply regret that, too. Let me be absolutely honest with you. Harry would have been in danger, and those around him in danger, no matter where or with whom he was placed, even in the wizarding world. He and those around him would, in fact, have been in even greater danger in the wizarding world; he would have been more exposed to access by dark wizards. Since someone was going to be in danger in any case, I sought to minimize the danger to Harry and others. As I explained to you in the letter I left with Harry, placing him with you was the way to do that. I also assumed that, as his closest living relatives, you would share an interest in his welfare."

Harry wondered how they would respond to that. All indications to him over the years had been that they had little or no interest in his welfare, but he was sure they would never admit that to Dumbledore, and probably not to themselves.

"I, we, would not have taken him if we did not have an interest in his welfare," said Petunia, assuming a dignified expression, as though that dignity had been called into question. "Our interest in his welfare extended to the opinion that he should not attend Hogwarts. He would have been perfectly safe growing up as a... Muggle, as you say. But you would not leave that to our judgment; you sent that violent giant to practically drag him from us."

Dumbledore gave a small smile. "Hagrid is the gentlest of people, actually. You must have caught him on a bad day. But to respond to your comment, in fact, Harry would not have been safe had he never attended Hogwarts. He would have been highly vulnerable."

Harry couldn't help chiming in. "Why is that, Professor? It does seem like I would have been safer. Would being the Boy Who Lived still have led me to trouble even living with Muggles?"

Seeing their confused faces, Dumbledore quickly explained the sobriquet to the Dursleys, then answered Harry's question. "Yes, Voldemort would have sought you to complete his rebirth anyway, and he would have had a much easier time getting ahold of you if you lived in the Muggle world. Also, consider what happened to you when he started becoming stronger. Your scar hurt, you had visions. You would not have known what to make of that. You or others would have feared for your mental health." He turned to Petunia. "Alas, for reasons you could not then know and would

not have wanted to hear, Harry's best interests were far better served by going to Hogwarts."

"Even if he's almost been killed ten times?" asked Dudley.

Dumbledore looked at Dudley in mild surprise. "Is it that many? I didn't realize."

Harry said, "Hermione told him that when he asked her. She counts the dragon, but I don't."

Dumbledore considered. "Dragons can kill, but many precautions were taken, so you each have a point. But we digress. To answer Dudley's question, yes, even given what has happened, Hogwarts is still safer. Harry's escapades are partly due to the efforts of dark wizards to undo him, but partly because he is an unusually brave and adventurous person. If you put in front of Harry a box that says 'Do not open, extreme danger,' Harry will think, 'I wonder what is so important inside that box,' and find a way inside." He smiled at Harry, who found it hard to argue. "So, Harry's character has something to do with it."

He turned back to the Dursleys. "In any case, I did what I thought best for all concerned. It would not be unreasonable for you to blame me for any danger that your family has faced or will face. Though I did what I thought best, I still must accept responsibility for my actions. That is one of the reasons I am here now."

In the kitchen, the phone rang. Harry immediately stood up. "I'll get it," he said, figuring himself the least important person in the conversation.

"Whoever it is, take a message," Vernon said as Harry walked to the kitchen.

It was Hermione. "Hi, Harry, I've made the arrangements, and I'm calling to tell you about them."

"Um, Hermione, I need to call you back. Professor Dumbledore is here and he's talking to the Dursleys."

"You're kidding!" said Hermione in astonishment. "How did that come about?"

"Another story for the next time we meet. I'll call you back, okay?"

"Okay, Harry, talk to you later."

Harry said goodbye and hung up. He walked back into the room. The conversation had gotten back around to Dudley and what danger he faced.

"Yes, I believe Harry's assessment of the situation is correct," Dumbledore was saying. "The chances of anyone putting Dudley in danger are very small. But as Mrs. Dursley says, they are there, and so the situation must be taken seriously."

"Well, what do you suggest?" asked Petunia.

"The best solution, I feel, is what could be referred to as a magic detector. It would be embedded in a piece of jewelry so as to be inconspicuous. It would glow and send a harmless vibration when in the presence of magic or any magical person. It

would also, at the same time, activate alarms at the Ministry of Magic. Protective teams would be on the spot in seconds. This sort of device has been used very successfully in the past with Muggles who have needed protection. In fact, all British Prime Ministers and monarchs have worn such devices for decades."

Vernon and Petunia stared in astonishment. "You must be joking," Vernon gaped. "You mean... they know about your lot?"

"It would be difficult to conceal our existence from Muggles without their help," Dumbledore explained. "This is a service we provide in return. In the case of the Prime Minister and the monarch, the device senses not only magic, but just anyone with the intent to kill. It is one of the reasons a Prime Minister or monarch has not been assassinated since this practice was begun."

"I thought it was because we don't allow handguns," Vernon said.

"That has something to do with it as well," Dumbledore allowed, "but any sufficiently determined person can acquire any weapon they wish. They are made in such quantities in America and Russia, among other places, as to make keeping them totally out impossible."

Vernon grunted. "You're quite well informed about our world."

Dumbledore tilted his head in acknowledgment of the compliment. "I read the Times, the Guardian, and the Sun," he said, the last drawing raised eyebrows from Vernon and Petunia, who were obviously surprised that Dumbledore would read a popular tabloid. "I feel it important to know about Muggle news and culture. Outrageous though it may be at times, the Sun is an excellent reflector of popular culture."

"More's the pity," Vernon said in reluctant agreement.

Dudley broke in. "I'm not wearing any jewelry," he announced. "I never have, and I'm not going to start now. You have to think of something else."

Vernon turned to Dudley. "I understand how you feel, Dud, but men do wear jewelry sometimes. My wedding band, for example," he said, holding up his hand.

"I did bring something I felt might be appropriate," said Dumbledore, reaching into his robes. "If the design is not to your liking, another can be arranged. It is to be worn around the neck." He handed it over to Dudley.

Dudley looked at it. It was a representation of a fist, a particularly masculine and threatening-looking one, gripping a lightning bolt. It was not large; just a half-inch wide, and an inch from tip to tip of the lightning bolt. The slim chain went through a small hole at the upper tip of the lightning bolt.

Harry saw Vernon and Petunia recoil as soon as they saw it, which did not surprise him. Not their kind of thing, to put it mildly, he thought.

Dudley, however, was entranced. "Cool!" he said, eyes wide as he looked at it from all angles. It was glowing.

Vernon looked uncomfortably at Dumbledore. "I was, erm, hoping it would be something more neutral, like my wedding band," he said. "I really don't care for that."

Dumbledore nodded. "Indeed, which makes it all the better. It is far less important that you admire it than that Dudley and his peers do. If they do not, he may be tempted to put it aside. If he and his friends think it is 'cool,' he will be more inclined to wear it, which is what is desired, is it not?"

Vernon and Petunia looked for a moment as though this was a higher price than they'd intended to pay, but both finally nodded their acquiescence.

"Why is it glowing?" Dudley asked. "You said it would only glow if there were... oh, is it because of you and him?" Dudley gestured towards Harry.

"It is because of Harry, yes," Dumbledore said. "It can be adjusted so as to not be activated in the presence of specific wizards or their magic. I have already adjusted it to not recognize me. I shall do the same for Harry." He extended his hand to Dudley, who handed over the necklace.

Dumbledore handed it to Harry. "Please hold it so that the lightning bolt is entirely surrounded by your hand, Harry," he asked. Harry did so. Dumbledore produced his wand and swished it gently over Harry's hand. A silvery glow surrounded Harry's hand and then faded, seeming to absorb itself into his hand. At Dumbledore's prompting, he gave it back to Dumbledore, who again handed it to Dudley. It was no longer glowing.

"It is now adjusted, and will not glow in Harry's presence, nor mine," Dumbledore said. "Now I must ask you a question, Dudley. For this to work as it is designed to, it must be worn twenty-four hours a day. Is there any reason you cannot do so?"

Dudley thought for a moment. "Yes, I will," he said.

Dumbledore looked at Dudley seriously. "I'm sorry, Dudley, to be so rude as to say this, but this is very important, too important to lie about, as you have just done."

Dudley's eyes went wide. Vernon said, "Now, see here," just as Petunia said, "How dare you!"

Harry interrupted. "Professor Dumbledore, you should know," he explained to the Dursleys, "has the ability to tell when a person is lying. It's a very rare magical skill, but he has it."

Vernon harrumphed. "And I suppose you found that out the hard way."

"Actually, Harry has never lied to me," Dumbledore said. "He has, perhaps, failed to tell me things he should have; of course, it could be said that I have done the same. But he has never lied."

Vernon clearly still didn't believe it. "All right, then, you won't mind if I test you out on this?" he challenged Dumbledore, who placidly shook his head.

"Very well," said Vernon. "I am forty-four years old. My favorite food is beef Wellington. Petunia and I were married on a Saturday. My company had over 5 million pounds in sales last year. Last night I watched the telly until midnight. Right now, my head itches." He glared at Dumbledore. "Now which, if any, of those statements were untrue?"

Without hesitation, Dumbledore answered, "The first, second, fourth, and sixth. The ones regarding your wedding and the television were true."

Vernon visibly deflated. Petunia questioned Vernon with her eyes; he nodded. "He's exactly right," he said, so that Dudley would know as well. Turning to Dudley, he asked, "Were you lying, Dudley?"

Dudley looked down. "Only a bit," he said defensively. "I planned to take it off when I boxed."

"I cannot see why you would, Dudley," said Dumbledore. "As I understand the rules of boxing, punching the neck is not permitted, so it would not be dangerous. In addition, it might prove intimidating or distracting to your opponents. Wearing it could only be to your advantage."

Dudley appeared not to have thought of it that way. Looking at the necklace again, he nodded. "OK, I'll wear it all the time. I'm not lying this time."

Dumbledore smiled. "Yes, I can see that," he assured Dudley.

"So, how will this work?" asked Petunia. "What is its range?"

"It will detect any magical person or activity within a range of one hundred meters," said Dumbledore. "If it detects magic, the best thing for you to do is hide," he told Dudley. "Anyone who comes looking for you will not expect you to be protected, and so will think you to be totally unprepared. Hiding will also make life easier for your protectors, who should materialize within seconds, with advanced magic detectors which can pinpoint the source of the magic and take action. These people are called Aurors; their job is to track down and capture dark wizards. Their function is somewhat analogous to Britain's MI5, or America's F.B.I. It is the profession, in case you did not know, to which Harry aspires after he graduates from Hogwarts."

Vernon rolled his eyes. "Right, because there hasn't been enough danger in your life up 'till now," he said sarcastically.

"No, it's because these people have been hounding me for five years," Harry said firmly. "I don't want to just sit back and be protected. I want to do something about it." He gave the Dursleys a challenging look. Petunia looked away, but Harry thought he saw some respect and understanding in Dudley and Vernon's eyes, especially Dudley's. He knew Dudley could identify with that right now.

"And you will," Dumbledore assured Harry. "I believe I have never mentioned this to you, but I am confident you will make an excellent Auror. You have the raw talent and strong character necessary, and with time and training, your skills will reach the necessary level."

Harry didn't know what to say. "Thank you," was all he could think of. He could think of no greater compliment.

Dumbledore nodded. "As I was saying, two Aurors will stay with Dudley and make sure he is protected, while another two will attempt to track the source of the magic. The two remaining with him will move him to a secure location until the immediate danger has passed."

"How will they move him?" asked Vernon.

"They will Apparate. Disapparation and Apparation are terms we use to describe a wizard's ability to disappear and reappear at a different place. This is how they will move him."

"Professor," Harry broke in, "I didn't know that you could move other people by Disapparating and Apparating. I thought people could only do it by themselves."

"Normally, that is true," Dumbledore explained. "But it is possible to escort others by doing so. It requires substantial magical power, and only Aurors or other specifically licensed individuals are permitted to do so."

"Getting back to the matter at hand, wearing this magic detector will make Dudley completely safe from attack from dark wizards?" Petunia asked.

Dumbledore nodded. "I hesitate to endorse the word 'completely'; the vagaries of life are such that we can never completely know the future. I will say that he will be extremely safe, as safe as we can make him without giving him an around-the-clock security presence, such as Harry has."

Vernon had not heard the conversation earlier in which Harry had told Dudley and Petunia about this, and looked astonished. "He has a security detail? Like the bloody Prime Minister?"

"Harry, unfortunately, has more threats on his life than the Prime Minister does," Dumbledore said.

"Then why didn't this detail break up the fight yesterday? All this mess could have been avoided," Vernon pointed out.

"Yeah, I was wondering about that myself," agreed Dudley. "I never even saw anybody else."

"Harry's security is very discreet. I am told that they occasionally catch him looking around to see if he can spot them," Dumbledore said, glancing at Harry with bemusement, "but he never can. Wizards have various ways of making themselves invisible, but they will still be detected by the device Dudley will wear, even though invisible. As for why they did not intercede, it was largely because of the presence of Mr. Malfoy and his father's connections to the Death Eaters." At the Dursleys' horrified looks, Dumbledore in an aside explained the nickname and what it meant. "It was feared that if Harry's guards interceded, Mr. Malfoy would relate the incident to his father or his father's associates, and Voldemort would know that Harry was being guarded. It is to our tactical advantage to keep this information secret for as long as possible, so we have a greater chance of capturing anyone who makes an attempt on Harry. In yesterday's situation, there was no true threat to Harry or Dudley, or at least no threat that they themselves could not handle," he said, smiling at Dudley, who looked pleased at the compliment. "If there had been a true danger, Harry's guards would have intervened."

The answer seemed to satisfy Vernon. "I see," he said. "Well, it seems there is not much more to be done, then." Wanting to end the conversation on a more positive note, he added, "But you say, don't you, that the chances of anyone even trying are..."

"Remote, yes, quite so," Dumbledore agreed. "If you find yourselves worrying, do keep that in mind."

"I'll try, but I'm sure I'll worry anyway," said Petunia.

"Before I take my leave, there is something else I would like to mention, another preventative measure." Vernon gestured for him to continue.

"As Harry may have told you, wizards travel from place to place by fireplace, by means of what we call the Floo network. Although Aurors can transport others by Apparation, in an emergency situation, it would be very helpful to be able to use your fireplace should the need arise. So, I would suggest that you keep your fireplace open and connected to the Floo network."

Harry raised his eyebrows; this was asking a lot of Vernon and Petunia, and a look at their faces showed that they thought so, too. Vernon raised a practical objection.

"Wouldn't that mean that any wizard who pleased could waltz right into our fireplace? Wouldn't that be quite dangerous?"

"No, not at all," Dumbledore said. "There are, naturally, security measures built into the Floo network. Merchants and other public establishments have what we call open fireplaces, but residences' fireplaces can only be used by people who have

been given authorization. In your case, authorization could be limited to emergency Auror assistance, Harry, and whichever other individuals you see fit to authorize. No one else could come through."

Vernon and Petunia still looked dubious, but were at least thinking it over. Harry suspected that their desire for security and possible emergency assistance was being balanced against the desire not to have any such connection to the magical world.

"There are other reasons why connecting to the Floo network would be desirable," Dumbledore continued. "As you have said, interested as you are in Harry's welfare, you will be glad to know that access to the Floo network through this fireplace would increase his safety. As things stand now, to go anywhere else in the magical world, he must leave this house and use standard transportation to wherever he wants to go, during which time he is potentially exposed to threat, in spite of our efforts to protect him. Such efforts are not infallible, as we saw last summer, when due to human error he was left temporarily unprotected just when the dementors attacked. By using this fireplace, he would be exposed to less risk."

Harry would have been very surprised if this argument had swayed the Dursleys, who he assumed were of the opinion that whatever risk he faced was his own fault, and responsible for their current situation. Their faces suggested that they were waiting for more persuasive arguments. Harry was amused, though, at the phrasing of Dumbledore's first sentence; it sounded like he was saying that if they cared about Harry the least little bit, they would do this. Perhaps he could shame them into it, if nothing else.

"Secondly," Dumbledore went on, "and the likelihood of this is remote, but it could be a useful means of escape for Dudley and yourselves should this house fall under attack by dark wizards. Aurors could Apparate here and take on the wizards, covering your escape. Again," he said as he saw that Vernon and Petunia appeared startled at the very possibility, "this will almost certainly not happen; it is merely a safety precaution. There are only positives to doing this, no negatives."

Vernon and Petunia looked at each other, communicating without words. Petunia said, "There are a few more questions we'd like to ask you about this, but it has nothing to do with Harry or Dudley, and we'd like to ask you privately. So, you two, please go upstairs." Harry and Dudley got up.

"If you don't mind, I would like to have a brief word with the two young men after we are finished here. Perhaps I can join them upstairs a bit later," Dumbledore said. Vernon nodded, and Harry and Dudley headed upstairs.

Harry and Dudley walked up the stairs. "Wonder what that's all about," said Dudley.

"Don't know," Harry answered. "Can't think of what else they would need to ask him."

As they neared their rooms, Dudley said, "Hey, why don't you show me some of your birthday presents."

Another first, Harry thought. He wondered if hearing about Harry's dangerous experiences made the magical world look more exciting to Dudley than it used to. At least it seemed to have removed whatever revulsion he had to it.

"Sure, come on in," Harry said, entering the room. They entered the room. Hedwig hooted; Harry wondered whether it was because of Dudley.

"My presents, let's see..." Harry knew there were at least two presents he couldn't show Dudley. One was the Extendable Ears; it wouldn't do for Dudley to know that he could listen in on anyone in the house. The other was the pumpkin cake; should Dudley turn antagonistic, he could report Harry to Petunia for having food in his room. He started thinking of things in his trunk that he could say were birthday presents. He decided to start with Hermione's because Dudley knew Hermione a little, having talked to her briefly.

They sat down on Harry's bed. "Well, this one is from Hermione," he said, showing Dudley the large black book. "She's one of the types who always get the best scores in the class, so she always gets me practical stuff. But this is really good, it's got lots of really advanced information."

Dudley flipped through the book, looking at the illustrations, not the text. He closed it again and took note of the title. "...strategies for teaching? Are you planning to be a teacher? I thought he said you wanted to be an Auror!"

Harry quickly explained about the D.A. and why he had been asked to lead the class, and how it led to being named a teacher this year. At Dudley's amazed expression, Harry added, "But it's partly because all the people who are good are busy fighting Voldemort, and partly because there's supposed to be this jinx on the position, so nobody wants to take it. Bad things have happened to the last five teachers."

Dudley looked at Harry as though evaluating his mental health. "So, you're taking a jinxed job. I guess it's like Dad said, you can't get enough of that danger."

"Not really," Harry said. "It's more like, Professor Dumbledore is the kind of person it's hard to say no to."

Dudley looked thoughtful and nodded. "So, what else did you get?"

"Well, I got this from Ron, you know, the tall, red-haired one. He and Hermione are my two closest friends, the three of us are always doing stuff together. He got me this, it's the blue thing on the outside." He now had to explain how the Omnioculars worked, then the Omni-view, and finally, Quidditch.

Dudley was able to watch the Quidditch, but even with Harry's basic explanation, it looked to him like a bunch of people flying around on brooms hitting and throwing balls, which he told Harry. Not that that wasn't interesting anyway, he said, never having seen people on brooms before.

"It's almost like a whole different world you guys have, isn't it?" Dudley observed.

"In a way, yes," Harry said. "The details are really different. But when you get right down to it, the people are really the same. Just like the Muggle world, we have good and bad people, greedy and generous, rich and poor, arrogant and humble. People are people, with magical ability or not."

"Well put, Harry, I could not have said it better myself," said Professor Dumbledore, who entered the room as Harry finished his sentence. Harry and Dudley stood up.

"I have finished discussing it with your aunt and uncle," Dumbledore said, addressing Harry, "and they have agreed to open the fireplace to you and for use in emergencies. I know you may be tempted to press them for permission to have Ron and Hermione authorized as well, but I advise you to be patient. Even allowing this much was a difficult decision for them." Harry could well believe that. "I have brought with me a quantity of Floo powder to get you started. I believe you will find more easily enough in Diagon Alley." He handed Harry a small pouch.

"Dudley, just a reminder, make sure the device is always next to your skin. If it is, say, outside a t-shirt or more layers, you might not feel it should it start vibrating. I assume you are clear on what you should do in the unlikely event it should do so?"

Dudley nodded. "Get to a safe place, wait for the Aurors."

"Good," Dumbledore said. "I also strongly recommend that you follow any instructions they might give you, for your own safety." Dudley nodded again.

"Now, there is one other thing. Yesterday during your confrontation with Mr. Malfoy, it so happened that the responsibility of watching you was mine." Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise; he wasn't aware that Dumbledore ever did that. "I witnessed the whole incident, and followed you home to make sure you encountered no more difficulty. I further overheard your discussion regarding the Weasley twins and their shop." He looked at Harry significantly.

Harry tried not to look guilty. "The Snackbox..."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, the Snackbox. The Weasley twins have clearly hit upon a winner with that, though they will have to start changing the symptoms as teachers get wise to them. Now, Dudley, you may not be aware, but we generally try

hard to prevent items imbued with magic from reaching the Muggle world. Experience has shown us that there are too many unintended consequences."

Turning to Harry, he continued, "Harry, I am fairly sure you are aware of that, but I can understand your desire to be helpful to your cousin in this situation. Also, I am only aware of this because I was guarding you, and any information I gain by doing so I should not use, lest you feel like slipping away to ensure privacy. You see, the only reason I am mentioning this is that the Snackboxes would activate Dudley's magic-detection device, causing a great deal of trouble and embarrassment. So, before I came here tonight, I stopped by the Weasleys' new shop, which seems to be doing quite well. I asked them to set aside a Snackbox, and I adjusted it so that it will no longer activate Dudley's device. I told them that someone would be in to pick it up, and to hold it until then."

Dudley's jaw had dropped open as soon as it dawned on him that Dumbledore was not going to lower the boom on them, and it remained open.

Dumbledore turned back to Dudley. "I have two other things to say about this. First, and Harry would have told you this anyway, but when you take them, be very careful to use the antidote as soon as possible. Unchecked nosebleed or vomiting can lead to serious physical harm, and since the symptoms are caused by magic, a Muggle physician would not know what to do.

"Secondly, I would request that you not ask Harry for any magic-imbued items in the future. I know that Harry would wish to give you what you ask for, but as I mentioned before..."

"Unintended consequences, yeah," said Dudley. "It's too bad, but okay, I understand."

Dumbledore smiled. "At the Ministry of Magic, there are very thick files full of examples of what problems happen when magical items fall into unwary Muggle hands. Harry could also get in trouble. Granted, he has spent much of the past five years in some kind of trouble, but I think you know what I mean." He winked at Harry.

Harry was embarrassed and grateful. "I'll bet you've never had to give this kind of talk to a professor before."

"You might be surprised, Harry. You might be very surprised indeed. If the worst problem I ever had to deal with from a new professor were a boyish prank, my career would have been a lot simpler.

"Alas, I must be off. I will take my leave of your aunt and uncle and exit via the fireplace. Dudley, it was a pleasure meeting you." He shook Dudley's hand again. Harry, I will be seeing you on Monday. The location for the Occlumency lesson has

been changed; it will now be held at the Burrow. I will explain the reason for the change then."

He paused, and spoke again to Harry. "One other thing, Harry. Perhaps you were just being modest, but I do not wish you to have an incorrect impression. I did not ask you to be the Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor 'because all the people who are good are busy fighting Voldemort,' as you put it. I did it because I believe that you are an excellent choice, and you will do an excellent job." He nodded to Harry and Dudley. "A very good evening to you both," he said, and left the room.

Harry and Dudley just stared at each other for a minute, unable to say anything. Finally Harry said, "I've known him for five years, and I don't think he'll ever stop surprising me."

Dudley looked wistful. "I wish my school's headmaster was like that."

Harry soon went downstairs and called Hermione back. He found out that the get-together had evolved into a sleepover, which made him happy, though he wondered if they wouldn't just end up staying up all night instead. Neville had been invited and was happy to come, but his grandmother would not allow him to sleep over; he would have to go home by midnight.

For his part, Harry decided that it was a much better idea to tell Vernon and Petunia that he would be sleeping over at Hermione's than asking them. He figured they wouldn't care much in any case, and he soon discovered that he was right. He was very pleased that he would be able to travel by Floo. He didn't especially care for the experience, except that it was better than the alternatives.

The next afternoon, Harry went downstairs a few minutes before 4:00. Vernon and Petunia were outside, which Harry assumed was by design. They may have been willing to let him use the fireplace for travel on safety grounds, but they still didn't want to watch anything magical being done.

Dudley came downstairs. Harry assumed he did want to watch, and had not been with his parents outside because they would not have let him come into the house at just before 4:00.

"So," Harry said, "did you get a lecture about how you should never, ever, ever use this for any reason whatsoever except for the most dire possible emergency, and then only if told?"

"Yeah, but it was a lot longer, and more emphatic than that," Dudley answered casually. "Something to do with having my privileges revoked for the rest of my life, and them sending me off to your school to be practiced on."

"That would be bad," Harry laughed. "I can see it now," and he launched into an imitation of Snape's voice, "...and now we will see whether Mr. Potter has made his Knockout Potion too strong again. Drink it down, Mr. Dursley." They both laughed heartily.

Harry looked at his watch. "Well, gotta go."

Dudley said, "Okay... watch out for, you know... vampires, and giant porcupines, and trees that eat people, and land sharks, and quicksand that looks like lawns..."

Harry nodded, deadpan. "Ah, the usual, you mean..." Smiling, he asked, "So, how long were you, thinking that up?"

"Couple minutes. Not too long."

Harry made a 'not too bad' facial expression. He waved. "Bye."

He took a pinch of Floo powder, threw it into the fire, and walked in, shouting "The Granger home!"

Chapter 5

The Sleepover

When Harry recovered from the usual disorientation of traveling by Floo powder, he looked around and quickly saw Hermione, Ron, and Ginny standing in the living room, talking. They walked over to greet him.

"Hi, Harry! Great to see you again, finally," Ron said cheerfully.

"You doing okay, Harry?" asked Ginny.

"Yeah, pretty good... even better, being here, with you guys, and in a house where 'wizard' and 'magic' aren't dirty words. Where are your parents?" he asked Hermione.

"They were supposed to be back by now, but they're running late with some stuff they had to do," she said. "They called and said they'd be another half hour."

"Okay, Hermione, are you going to tell us now?" asked Ron.

"Tell you what?" asked Hermione, confused.

To Harry, Ron said, "She's been acting like there's something she wants to tell us, but didn't want to do it until you got here. You know, it's this 'I know something you don't know' sort of expression."

Hermione looked at Ron sourly. "That's the problem with spending so much time around people, they start to work out things like that. I guess I have to work on my poker face."

"Your what?" asked Ginny, looking blank.

"Guess that's not really a phrase in the wizarding world," Harry noted. He glanced at Hermione, whose expression said, go ahead, tell them. He tried to make his voice sound casual as he said, "Hermione and I found out who next year's Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher is."

"Oh, boy, I feel like there should be somber music playing, a dirge maybe," said Ron, grinning. "In fact, I was thinking, in the room where they teach that class, there should be a plaque that reads 'Hall of Misfortune'-you know, like 'Hall of Fame'-with the subheading, 'Hogwarts' Distinguished Defense Against the Dark Arts Teachers, and Their Tragic Fates,' and then a gallery with each teacher's portrait, and below, a description of how they met their unhappy ends." Ginny chuckled a little, but Hermione was frowning, which Ron did not notice.

"Anyway," continued Ron, "So who's the poor sap they've got to do it this year?"

Harry almost smiled; he couldn't wait to see the look on Ron's face. "That would be me."

Ron looked blank for a second, then laughed. "No, c'mon, seriously, who is it?"

Harry glanced at Ginny; he could tell by the astonishment on her face that she believed him.

"I'm afraid I'm serious, Ron," Harry said. "Dumbledore said it was because of what I did with the D.A. He wants me to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts."

Ron looked at Hermione, in shock. She nodded. "It's true, Ron. That's why I really wanted to tell you, but I wanted to wait for Harry,"

Ginny's look of astonishment had transformed to one of joy. "You're going to be teaching us? Oh, that's so great!" She was so excited that the last word was more like a squeak. She rushed forward and threw her arms around Harry.

"Congratulations!"

Harry chuckled and hugged her back. He glanced at Hermione, who looked very pleased. "Seems there's a lot of hugging involved in this teaching business," he joked. To Ginny, who had just released him, he said, "Thanks. At least I know there'll be one friendly face in my classes."

She playfully shoved him in the chest. "Are you kidding? People will be thrilled!"

Harry looked as if he didn't believe her, but didn't want to contradict her and rain on her parade. "That would be nice," he said.

The news was registering with Ron only very slowly. "You're really serious?"

Harry decided to have mercy on Ron, and explain it so that it didn't sound so off-the-wall. "Okay, here's the main reason. You got an Outstanding on your O.W.L. for Defense Against the Dark Arts, right?"

"Yeah, I did. How'd you know?"

"Because Dumbledore told me that every fifth year in the D.A. did, too. He figures I'm largely responsible, and hopes I can do it for the whole school."

"Every fifth year in the D.A.? Wow, that is impressive..." Ron was starting to come out of his shock. "Funny, when I think of it like that, just doing in classes what you did in the D.A., it doesn't seem so strange. It's just that we think of teachers as these authority figures who are all strict and give out detentions and stuff... I can't see you doing that, but I can see you helping people learn. I guess that's what Dumbledore wants." He looked at Harry more seriously. "How do you feel about this? I mean, I'd be terrified, if it was me."

"I think my reactions were pretty much the same as yours... shock, disbelief, terror..." Harry smiled. "But I've had a whole, what, forty-eight hours now to get used to it, so I'm not doing so badly now. Hermione has been serving as my cheerleader and self-confidence builder, and now it looks like she's got company," he said, looking at Ginny, who smiled back and nodded.

"You'll be great, Harry," she enthused. "You'll be wonderful."

He shook his head in surprise at her attitude. "Like I said to Hermione, you just keep telling me that."

"Okay, we will," said Ginny.

"Anyway, I've gotten used to the idea a bit, but I'm kind of worried about how the Slytherins are going to act. There's bound to be a test of my authority, probably early."

"You can give out detentions, can't you?" Ron asked.

"Yes, and Dumbledore pretty much told me that I was going to have to do so at some point." Harry said.

"And it's going to be mostly Slytherins," Ginny speculated, "partly because they don't like you anyway, and partly because Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff won't be trying to get on your back. Their prefects were in the D.A., so they'll be telling their houses to give you a break. So the point is, don't give Slytherins a break because it seems like you're only giving them detentions. That's bound to happen."

"Snape'll be on me, asking why I'm only giving his house detentions."

"Just tell him to go get stuffed," Ron suggested.

"Yeah, right," Harry said. "That'll work."

"Actually, Ron's right, though you have to be a little more polite than that," Hermione said. "But you do have to be firm. You tell him that the students in his house are testing your authority, and as he well knows, a teacher has to put his foot down. Then tell him that if he tells his house to behave properly in your classes, the detentions will stop."

"Hang on, let me write this down," Harry joked.

"I think you'll know what to say when the time comes," Hermione assured him.

"Wait a minute, how am I going to give detentions?" Harry asked, suddenly in a mild panic. "The teacher has to be there as well, and I'll be studying or with Quidditch practice. The Slytherins'll start getting detentions on purpose so my time'll be all messed up."

"Didn't McGonagall tell you?" asked Hermione in surprise. "After you left Hogwarts the day before yesterday, I was asking her about some of this stuff, how it would work with you teaching, and I asked about detentions. She said that any detentions you give would be served with her."

"Excellent," said Ron. "That should be a pretty good deterrent."

Harry was relieved. "That was good of her. I hate to think of what might happen if I had to do them myself. Funny, I'd never looked at detentions from the teacher's side of it until now. It never occurred to me that they might rather be doing something else as well."

They heard a noise coming from the fireplace and turned around; Neville was recovering his balance, then walking towards them. "Hi, everyone!" he said cheerfully.

"Hi, Neville," they all said, almost in chorus. "Thanks for coming," said Hermione.

"Thanks for inviting me," Neville said. He looked around. "This is neat, I've never been in a Muggle house before. Is this what most are like?" he asked, looking at Harry and Hermione.

"Bit bigger, I think," said Harry.

"Yes, it is, a little bit," agreed Hermione. "My parents are dentists, so their income's a little above average, but we're not rich or anything. You'll get the tour of the house when my parents get back. It should be any time now."

"My dad would be going nuts," said Ron. "Asking about every little thing, how does this work, how does that work..."

"Oh, Hermione, I just remembered, I need to ask you what you've told your parents about the stuff we've done, you know, the dangerous stuff," Harry said. "How much of it do they know?"

"If in doubt, don't say it," she said. "The first year, with the Sorcerer's Stone, I told them everything, and my mother almost had a heart attack. Not that

she was angry, just really worried. And in the second year, I couldn't very well avoid telling her that I was Petrified for a month or so. She was pretty worried about that, too. So in the third year, when you saved us from the dementors, well, she didn't hear anything about that, or us setting Sirius free, or the Department of Mysteries. No reason for her to worry needlessly."

"So, Neville, have you heard the news about Harry?" asked Ron, looking eager to get to see someone else's reaction.

"You mean about him teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts?" Neville asked guilelessly, as though there might be other news about Harry he hadn't heard.

"Yeah, that," said Ron, looking rather less eager.

"How did you find out, Neville? Not many people have been told, I thought," asked Hermione.

"My gran wrote Professor Dumbledore a letter recently, and he mentioned it when writing her back," said Neville. "She just got it today." Looking at Harry, he said, "Congratulations, you really deserve it. I mean, I got an Outstanding on my Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L.! Last year at this time, I didn't think I'd be able to manage an Acceptable. Being in the D.A. made all the difference."

"Well, you worked hard," said Harry. "I'm not sure that I deserve credit for your effort. I hope people know that they won't get better unless they try as hard as people did in the D.A. last year."

"Maybe you should mention it in your introductory lectures," suggested Hermione.

"Don't think I'm going to be doing much lecturing... but is that something I should really go out of my way to say? 'Hey, people, you won't get better unless you try'? Seems kind of obvious." Harry found that he didn't want to think about giving lectures; he just wanted to do what he'd done in the D.A.

Hermione's parents returned, and things went the way such things normally do: introductions, a tour of the house, a chat in the living room, and then dinner. Hermione's mother had offered to cook dinner, but Hermione knew that having dinner in a Muggle home was quite a novelty for Ron, Ginny, and Neville, so she wanted to avoid anything they might normally have at home or at Hogwarts. She asked her parents to get a couple of takeaway pizzas and some Cokes. Hermione and her mother had baked some chocolate chip cookies earlier in the day to have for dessert.

The pizza was a big hit with Neville and the Weasleys, and Harry as well, who hadn't had as much pizza in his life as he would have liked. They had three large pieces each, and were so full that they decided to wait until later to have the cookies. Then the Grangers went upstairs, so the kids could chat without discomfort or the oppressive feeling of close parental supervision.

Hermione started off by asking Harry to tell the whole story of what had happened with Malfoy's visit to Privet Drive, and how it had led to Dumbledore's visit and the Dursleys' increased tolerance of discussion of magic. Harry had to first explain to Neville how the Dursleys were about magic and how he was generally treated in the past, which earned him amazed looks from Neville.

All were spellbound at Harry's recounting of the tale about Dudley and Malfoy, and offered only brief interjections ("the swine!", "good for him!", "nice to see Dudley being useful for a change") throughout. They debated just how much trouble Malfoy was in, whether he might get off with a warning, whether Malfoy's family connections would do him any good now that his father was a known Death Eater, and whether he could or would argue that it was self-defense. They shared the hope that his actions could get him expelled from Hogwarts, but agreed that it was unfortunately unlikely.

Harry asked Ron about Weasley family news. "Not much that I haven't already told you by owls," Ron said. "I did just find out that Fred and George are planning on moving out soon. They've been looking for a place for a month or two, since they left Hogwarts, and they said yesterday that they've found someplace they like, it's just a matter of finalizing it."

"That'll leave only you and Ginny at home," Hermione noted. "How do your parents feel about that?"

"Well, they don't know yet. Fred and George haven't exactly been on the best terms with Mum lately. She was really upset when they left Hogwarts before they graduated."

"They should get a Special Award for Services to the School, if you ask me," said Harry, "for what they did to Umbridge." The others laughed; Harry continued, "Seriously, they probably kept her off balance and occupied, so she couldn't make whatever changes she might have been planning sooner."

"We agree with you, Harry, and we tried to tell Mum how helpful they'd been, but she places less value on that than she does on a diploma," said Ginny. "She wasn't there, she doesn't know how it was with Umbridge there. I mean, if even Hermione was encouraging rebellion, you know things were bad."

"It's not only that," Ron continued, "but she's unhappy about the shop, too. Don't worry, Harry, she's not unhappy with you specifically for giving them the money to start it. She reckons you'd been through a serious trauma and weren't thinking straight." Harry started to protest, but Ron cut him off with a gesture. "I know, it was nothing like that, but I think Mum doesn't want to be angry at you, so she came up with a reason why it wasn't your fault. They told her that you practically forced it on them—"

"Which was true," Harry cut in.

"-but Mum had decided that it was their fault, and nothing was going to change her mind. Anyway, things were kind of tense between her and them when they got home. They're not happy with her, either, because they reckon-and Ginny and I agree, of course-that they've done nothing wrong. There was a bit of a blow-up a few days after Ginny and I got back. I guess Mum had made one comment too many, and Fred said, 'I suppose you'd still have us take a leaf from Percy's book?' And George said, 'There's things more important than how far you get in the Ministry. At least Dad understands that.'"

Harry winced, and Ginny nodded. "Yeah, it was pretty bad. They were right, though. You'd think Mum would take a lesson from what happened with Percy. I think she just had to take some time to get used to their dropping out and the shop, but they were getting tired of her picking at them. I don't blame them. I think they've made up since that happened, and Mum's trying not to comment on it so much. But she's still not happy, and they know it, so they want to get out. I'm glad they can afford to do it."

"How does your father feel about the shop?" asked Hermione.

"He's not bothered at all," said Ginny. "Whatever they do is fine with him, which only upsets Mum all the more. But Mum puts more stock in accomplishments and honors and things like that. She was so pleased at Ron's Outstanding Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L. that she's forgotten she ever told us not to be a part of the D.A. Just wait until she hears you're a teacher, Harry, she'll have kittens."

"Yes, more hugging," quipped Harry. "Part of the dangerous life I lead."

"Well, let's watch the movie, shall we?" Hermione said, reaching for the tape and putting it in the videotape recorder. She started the movie after explaining to Ron, Ginny, and Neville how the machines and the tapes worked. When Ron caught on, he said to Harry, "Ah, kind of like the Omni-view, isn't it?" Harry agreed, and thanked Ron for the present.

They watched the movie in silence, except for a pause for Hermione to explain as best she could how special effects worked. Hermione's mother came downstairs halfway through the movie and made them buttered popcorn. It turned out that while popcorn tended not to be served at Hogwarts, it was common enough in the magical world, and the one who had eaten it least was Harry.

After the movie, as they were eating the cookies with milk, Hermione asked Harry why Dudley had asked her about Harry's close shaves on the phone. "Why is he so interested all of a sudden?"

"I'm not sure," Harry said. "It was almost like turning a switch. Whatever it is, all of a sudden my being magical doesn't bother him at all. It's very strange, I can

tell you that. That's probably why I said yes when he asked about the Snackbox; I was startled because he'd never asked me for anything before."

"Maybe," Ron suggested, "it all sounds glamorous to him. Exotic, strange creatures, brushes with death... he doesn't see the other side of it. You know, worry, nightmares, that kind of thing." He picked up another cookie.

"You've had nightmares about the stuff we've gotten ourselves into?" Harry asked, surprised. He hadn't known that.

"I'd be surprised if any of us hadn't," said Hermione. "The mind has to deal with this stuff somehow, and if we don't talk or think about it, it'll come out in dreams."

"Well, maybe the three of us, but maybe not Neville or Ginny, they haven't done as much stuff as we have," said Ron.

"Oh, right, having Voldemort take you over and use your body against your will, no, that's nothing to get bothered enough about to have nightmares," Ginny said with annoyance.

"Well, then, how about you, Neville?" tried Ron.

Neville gulped. "Well, this isn't like wake-up-screaming scary, but... I've had the same dream a few times since then. I'm at the Department of Mysteries, in that room where Dumbledore found us, and I'm holding the prophecy, but in the dream, the prophecy has my name on it, not Harry's..."

Harry's heart almost stopped. Neville could have no way of knowing that the initial prophecy was ambiguous enough that the subject could have been him instead of Harry. Was Neville's unconscious mind giving him accurate information? Or was it just a strange coincidence?

"...and at some point it pops out of my hands and flies across the room, and into the... what do you call that thing, like a gateway... that thing that Sirius fell through when he died... I'm sorry, Harry..."

Harry shook his head and made a 'don't worry, go ahead' gesture.

"Well, you know what I'm talking about... anyway, it went through that, and disappeared, and I started walking over, following it. I was walking up the steps to the gateway, and I heard these voices telling me to cross through it, it was my destiny, the prophecy said I would. I pass through it and suddenly I'm falling, and that's when I wake up."

No one said anything for a moment as Neville looked at their faces for reactions. Finally Ginny said, "I don't know about you, but I'd say that qualifies as a nightmare. I mean, basically, you're dreaming about your own death."

"Yes, and it makes sense, since you saw someone die there," Hermione said, quickly casting an apologetic glance at Harry, "and you could have died yourself. Have you thought consciously about the fact that you could easily have died?"

"Oh, yeah, once or twice..." Neville said, making a poor attempt to feign a casual attitude. Then, giving up the pretense, he added, "... a day..." He grinned nervously.

"Well, it's hardly surprising, since you had the hardest time of anyone there, except Harry," said Hermione. "I mean, you were tortured... how can that not affect your dreams?"

"That's the strange thing; being tortured hasn't come into my dreams at all," said Neville. "I agree, you'd think it would. I mean, I think about it when I'm awake at times... daydreams about what I'd like to do to Bellatrix Lestrange before she dies a horrible and painful death." The others all looked at Neville sympathetically; they knew this very uncharacteristic attitude was because she had caused Neville untold pain, both last month and when he was a baby. "But I imagine you must too, Harry, she did something awful to you, too..."

"Actually, Neville, I haven't thought about her that much. I agree, you'd think I would... I don't know, maybe it's because I..." He trailed off. He hadn't intended to tell anyone about this, but the tone of the conversation was confessional, and they all had been with him there, they would understand... he felt a need to unburden himself.

They were looking at him expectantly. "You have to promise to tell no one this, absolutely no one," he said. They nodded as if to say of course, you don't need to tell us that. He swallowed and went on. "After seeing her kill Sirius, I think I was in denial for a few minutes. I thought he was coming back. When it finally started hitting me that he wasn't, I think I just went into a blind fury." The others looked at him anxiously. "After she escaped from the room, I screamed, said I'd kill her, something like that, and went after her. I don't know what I expected to do; I'm no match for her, but I wasn't thinking. I entered the lobby as she was at the end of it. She threw a spell, I think it was a Killing Curse, at me, which I dodged, hid behind something. She taunted me, doing that baby voice she did earlier. 'Did you loooove him?'" He shook his head, in anger again from the memory of it. "The next thing I knew, I leaped out from where I was hiding, pointed the wand at her, and yelled..." he paused for a few seconds, "... Crucio."

The others gaped; their mouths hung open and their eyes were wider than Harry thought they could get. In an absurd, random thought at a time such as this, Harry thought, I really wish I had a camera right now.

Hermione was the first to speak. "Oh, my God... oh, Harry..." She broke into sobs and leaned into him, crying on his shoulder and holding onto him. Harry was

bewildered; this wasn't a reaction he expected. He put his arm around her shoulder in a comforting gesture, feeling that it was very strange that he should need to.

After a few seconds, she started sniffing and trying to stop crying. Ginny leaped up to get a box of tissues, and put them in front of Hermione. Haltingly, Hermione said to Harry, "I'm sorry, I know this is strange, but I just... I was empathizing with you through the whole story, and... the fact that you did that, I know you, you would never do that, you must have been in so much pain..." She blew her nose, then continued. "I guess I went on empathy overload. I felt too much of your pain. But it makes me understand how what you did could happen. You weren't yourself."

She extricated herself from Harry and sat back up, blowing her nose one last time. Ron finally spoke. "No one else was there, were they? I mean, you could do life in Azkaban for that..." He still looked in shock.

"Yeah, I know, that was why I mentioned the bit about, you know, not saying anything..." Harry forced a small smile. "But no, no one else was there, I'm sure."

"He'd never be convicted anyway," argued Ginny, "considering the circumstances."

"Whether that's true or not, obviously it was the farthest thing from my mind at the time. I do know that the Muggle courts say that to be convicted of a crime, you have to have been mentally competent when you committed it. I'm pretty sure I wasn't."

"What happened then?" asked Neville. "Did it work?"

"For less than a second," Harry said. "She screamed and went down, but got right back up again. She told me it was obvious I'd never done that before, and that to do it so it lasts you have to be focusing on wanting to inflict pain, you have to enjoy it." He paused, thinking. "I hope to hell I never get that bad off, that I could do that."

"You won't, Harry," Hermione said fervently. "I promise you, you won't."

He nodded. "I was sort of afraid to tell you about it, afraid of what you'd think of me," he admitted. "It's a horrible thing to do, whatever the reason."

"C'mon, Harry," said Ginny. "We know who you are, and it's different from a few seconds of madness in a horrible situation. We know you."

"Yeah, Ginny's right," echoed Ron. "We know that's not who you are."

Harry looked troubled; he had been focused on having lost Sirius recently and hadn't thought about this incident so much. "But it's obviously at least some small part of who I am, if even in that state of mind, I could do it. It's there, somewhere."

"It's there in all of us, Harry," Hermione said. "We're all capable of something like that, or worse. It's part of being human, of having free will. You can't judge

yourself by a lapse of control at an unbelievably stressful moment; the human mind can only take so much, and the death of a loved one is the most stressful moment in a person's life. To have that person's killer taunt you about what she'd done, about the loss you suffered... is a provocation almost beyond imagining. Next to that, what you did... seems understandable."

"To me, especially," Neville said grimly.

"She taunted you, too," Harry said quietly. "About your parents. Before she tortured you."

The others looked shocked again; they hadn't known what Bellatrix had said to Neville.

"And if I'd had a wand, and had enough magical ability to think that the Cruciatus Curse would do any good, I'm almost certain I would have done it, maybe sustainably. I don't know," said Neville. "But it wouldn't surprise me at all."

"That woman is evil, just plain evil," said Ron, disgustedly. "And at least half mad, too, she kept losing control, Malfoy's dad had to keep holding her back."

"What happened after that, Harry? Was that when You-Know..." Neville sighed. "I guess I'd better get used to saying it...was that when... Voldemort arrived?"

"No, that was a few minutes later. She kept trying to get the prophecy, she didn't know that it had broken. I told her that it was broken; she didn't believe me, she kept trying to Summon it. I taunted her, saying her boss would be angry. She cried out to Voldemort, pleading with him not to punish her. I said, he's not here, he can't hear you. Then suddenly, he was there, saying. 'Can't I, Potter?' Then I just froze; I couldn't move or do anything. I don't know if it was me, or a spell of his. Then he sent the Killing Curse at me, which as you know, Dumbledore arrived just in time to block."

"What was he like, Harry?" asked Ron. "When he was facing... oh, all right... when he was facing Vol- Voldemort?"

"He was so calm, it was amazing," Harry related. "It was like he was having a casual chat with someone. No fear, no anger, just an intensity, but a subdued one, if that makes any sense. Very focused. He's talking to Voldemort-calling him 'Tom,' by the way, I guess since he knew him at Hogwarts when he was Tom Riddle-while at the same time casting and blocking spells, making sure that I'm protected. It was like he could do two or three things at once, effortlessly. It was amazing. I'm sure I could have appreciated it more if I hadn't been in such a state."

"I don't remember all of their conversation, but I do remember one thing," he continued. "Dumbledore said there are other ways to destroy a man than to kill him. Voldemort said there was nothing worse than death. Dumbledore said that one of

Voldemort's greatest weakness was not understanding that there are things worse than death."

"I wonder what he meant," Ron mused. "What could be worse than death?"

"I don't know, but I have an idea," said Harry. He related his conversation with Dumbledore two days ago at Hogwarts about the extent to which Voldemort could be said to still be human. "So," he concluded, "maybe Dumbledore meant the way Voldemort is living now, a kind of living death, at least for Tom Riddle, who really isn't around anymore. All Voldemort is, is a body occupied by evil. But maybe Dumbledore meant something else, I don't know."

"Do you think maybe the prophecy had something to do with it? I really wish I hadn't broken it," said Neville mournfully.

"It's better that you did, Neville, trust me," said Harry confidently. "If you hadn't, he would probably have gotten it. That could have been bad."

"Well, we can't know how bad it would have been, since we don't know what it said, can we?" pointed out Ron.

Harry said nothing. Hermione looked at him and suddenly understood.

"You know... you know what it says, don't you?"

Harry thought for another minute, and nodded. He knew he had to be careful.

"How did you find out? Did you know all along?" asked Ron, with a slight undertone of being annoyed if Harry had known and not told them.

Harry shook his head. "Dumbledore had it. He told me, in his office right after all that happened, exactly what it said. As far as I know, he and I are the only two people in the world who know what it says."

There was silence for a few seconds. Then Ron burst out with, "Well, c'mon, are you going to tell us, or not?" They looked at him expectantly.

Looking at them earnestly, Harry said, "I can't. Not because Dumbledore told me not to, but because your lives would be in danger if you knew, and knowing won't help you in any practical way."

"I don't think there's any of us who aren't willing to take that risk," said Ron fervently. The others nodded.

"I'm not willing to take that risk," Harry almost shouted, taking the others aback. "I've had enough people die for me. I'm not going to have any more if I can help it. Knowing it won't help you, and it won't help you help me."

"How would knowing put us in danger?" asked Ginny.

"If he found out that you knew-and he has powers we don't understand, we can't know he wouldn't find out-you'd be targets. He'd have his Death Eaters grab you, and bring you to him. He'd force it out of you, then kill you."

"But we wouldn't..." Ron trailed off, realizing that he was wrong.

"Tell him? You would," said Neville emphatically. "Any of us would. You hear about the Cruciatus Curse, you know it's horrible, but you can't really know until you've experienced it. We can't begin to imagine that much pain. How long did they do it to me, Harry?"

"About five seconds."

Neville shuddered. "Believe me, it felt like longer than five seconds. A lot longer. There aren't enough words to describe it. Anyone would break. Or..." he trailed off, unable to finish his sentence.

"Or suffer your parents' fate," Harry finished. Neville nodded. "I can easily believe it," Harry said. "Last year, when Voldemort did it to me, I don't know how long it was, but all I could think was that I wanted to die, just so the pain would stop." He made eye contact with each of the others in turn. "I won't risk that happening to you. Not over this."

"Couldn't we just lie to him? How would he know?" asked Ron.

"Dumbledore said that both he and Voldemort are expert Legilimens, which means they know if they're being lied to," Harry responded. "Only a powerful Occlumens could lie without being detected."

"Isn't it a problem that we know that you know?" Ron pressed. "I mean, he grabs one of us, makes us tell him that you know? Isn't that worse for you?"

Harry shook his head. "If Voldemort could have gotten me, he would have by now. It's not for lack of trying. And once he gets me, the prophecy doesn't matter anymore."

"How does he even know about the prophecy, then, if he's never heard it?"

"He knows a part of it. Dumbledore told me that one of his people was present and heard the first few sentences before being made to leave." Harry thought for a minute. "I guess I could tell you that part safely; he knows it, so there's no danger if you do."

They nodded in anticipation.

"Let's see, how did the first part go..." Harry struggled to remember the words as accurately as he could; he had played them back in his head several times. "'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies.' That's as much as Voldemort knows of the prophecy."

Everyone sat quietly for a minute, trying to digest this and figure out what it meant. Then Hermione said, "Your birthday is at the end of July. When exactly was the prophecy made?"

"About sixteen years and one month ago."

"One month before you were born," said Hermione.

"What does it mean, 'thrice defied him?'" Ron asked. "What does 'defy' mean in this case?"

"I think it means 'escaped,' like they got away from him though he intended to kill them but couldn't."

"But your name isn't mentioned?" Ginny asked. "It couldn't have been anyone else?"

"It is me," Harry said, "but at the time the prophecy was made, Professor Dumbledore told me, they couldn't know for sure who it was that the prophecy referred to. He said that at that time, there were two wizard children it could have referred to. I was one."

"Did he say who the other one was?" asked Ron.

Harry wasn't sure whether he should say it, but in a fundamental way he felt Neville had the right to know. "Yes, he did," said Harry. He stared at Neville.

Neville was the last one to work out what Harry's stare meant. Hermione gasped. "You mean... the other one it could have been... was Neville?"

Harry nodded, and kept his gaze on Neville. "Your birthday is only a few days away from mine. Your parents fought Voldemort."

Neville appeared to be in complete shock. His facial expression was unmoving, staring straight ahead.

"But the prophecy had your name on it," Ginny pointed out. "So how did they know that it was you and not Neville?"

"My name was put in later," Harry said. "At first there was a question mark; they didn't know. Later events, combined with knowing the rest of the prophecy, made it clear that it was me."

"But Voldemort didn't know that, right?" asked Hermione. "When he went after you, he didn't know for sure it was you, it could have been Neville as far as he was concerned, couldn't it?"

"Yes," Harry answered. "He couldn't know. Even Dumbledore doesn't know for sure why he chose me. Maybe he was going to do both of us, and happened to try for me first. We can't know."

"Wow... this tells us enough to understand what happened to Neville a bit better," Hermione said, now looking at Neville with great sympathy. "Neville's parents were attacked shortly after you were," referring to Harry, "Voldemort was gone... but maybe his followers still weren't sure which one it was..."

"Yes, I've thought the same thing," agreed Harry. "They probably guessed it was me by then, but they probably wanted to do in Neville too, just to be sure. Maybe Neville's parents had hidden him, just in case... Lestrangle and the others caught his parents, tried to make them tell them where Neville was, so they could go kill him..."

"...and if there's anyone who could refuse to crack under torture, it would be a parent trying to protect their child," Hermione finished. "They knew what would happen if they wouldn't tell, but they didn't... to protect Neville..." Hermione looked on the verge of tears again, as did Ginny. Even Ron was having a hard time keeping his face free of emotion.

"We don't know this for sure, of course," Harry said heavily. "Dumbledore didn't say that specifically, one way or the other. But it seems like it might have happened that way. It makes sense."

Neville finally reacted. He bent down towards the floor, his face in his hands, and started sobbing. The other four glanced at each other, then looked down. They knew he had more than enough reason.

Ginny, who was sitting next to Neville, moved over closer to him. She put her arm around his shoulders, and held his arm with her other hand. She kept doing so for another minute or two, until Neville had cried himself out. He took some tissues and blew his nose. "Sorry," he murmured.

"Are you kidding?" asked Ron. "I felt that way myself, and it wasn't even my family. It would be strange if you didn't react like that."

"Believe me, no one thinks any less of you," Harry assured him.

Neville nodded and slowly regained his composure. "I'm going to have to ask my gran some questions about this. Where was I, did it happen that way, maybe she doesn't know, or just hasn't told me." He looked at a clock; it was 11:45, fifteen minutes until he had to go back home. "I was going to pop back home to try to convince her to change her mind, to let me stay overnight. But now I'm just going back. I'd love to stay, but I have to find out some things."

"Boy, can I understand that," said Harry.

"Can I ask you something else about the prophecy, Harry?" Neville asked.

Harry wanted to help Neville as much as he could. "Of course. I'll answer if I think it won't be unsafe for anyone."

Neville nodded. "You said that it turned out that the prophecy was about you. Was that fixed in stone? Was it always going to be you, no matter what? Or, is it the case that, if some events had gone differently, it could have been me instead of you? Do you see what I mean?"

Harry did. "Yes, and I'm sorry, Neville, but I don't know, even knowing the whole prophecy. It could be that it was set in stone, but it could be otherwise. I'm not sure that even Dumbledore knows."

"I understand," said Neville. "Well, I think I'll go now. I'm probably not going to get much sleep tonight anyway. Got a few things to think about." He stood, then all the rest did too.

"Neville... now I'm wondering whether I should have told you this or not. Would it have been better if I hadn't?"

"Of course, Harry, you should've. I'm glad you did. I want to know as much about this as I can. It's my life, after all."

"I'm glad you feel that way," Harry said. "I felt like you deserved to know."

Neville walked over to the fireplace. "Thanks again for having me," he said to Hermione and the others.

"Thanks for coming," said Hermione. She walked up to him and patted his arm, after which Ginny did as well. He smiled, both heartened and embarrassed by the gestures of sympathy. He said goodbye, shouted his home's name, and disappeared into the fire.

The four of them stayed up for a while, eating more cookies and talking about Neville, the prophecy, and the events at the Department of Mysteries. It was a relief for Harry to talk about it, even if it was not about Sirius specifically; talking about the events in general helped to desensitize him to dwelling on Sirius every time the Ministry of Magic or the Department of Mysteries was mentioned. They set up and got into their sleeping bags on the living room floor, talked some more, and eventually fell asleep.

The next morning at breakfast Harry told the others about his Occlumency lesson scheduled for later that day. They were happy for him that he didn't have to study with Snape, though Hermione was mildly annoyed that he hadn't mentioned it to them until then ("it's not as though there hasn't been lots of other stuff to talk about," he pointed out). Harry told them that the lesson was supposed to take place in the Burrow, which surprised Ron, as he hadn't known.

At noon, it was decided that they would all go back to the Burrow, including Hermione, who was hoping she could put in a good word for the twins with Mrs. Weasley. Harry and the Weasleys said goodbye to Hermione's parents, and they took the fireplace to the Burrow.

The Weasleys' living room was empty, which to Harry was unusual; his experience was that the house was a hub of activity. Ron's father was at his job, and Harry imagined the twins were tending their shop. They didn't see Mrs. Weasley. Harry walked over to the clock that gave the location of every Weasley; hers was on 'shopping.' "Looks like we're the only ones here, then," said Ron. They all sat down in the living room.

"So, tell us about what Dumbledore said when he told you about the Occlumency lessons," said Ron. Harry related it as best he could remember, up to where the conversation turned to Harry's teaching position. Ron took mild umbrage at Harry's description of him as unusually vulnerable to Malfoy's taunts.

"But it's true!" insisted Hermione, as Ron scoffed. "As soon as he starts saying stuff, you lunge for him, you don't even use your wand. You need to do what Professor Dumbledore says, ignore him. They're only words."

"Didn't you haul off and slap him once?" Ron reminded her.

"I'm not saying I'm perfect," she admitted. "But I usually just try to be dignified and ignore it. He always does it to you because you react so well. Harry is better; except for that incident after the Quidditch match last year, he usually ignores it or insults him back. If you can't ignore him, at least come up with some good insults to use against him for this year. You can make it a summer project."

"This is an interesting suggestion from you... a summer project that doesn't involve schoolwork," smirked Ron.

"Like there's much chance of getting you to do schoolwork in summer," she retorted.

Harry chuckled. "I've got to say, after a month of being ignored at the Dursleys', it's even good to listen to you two quibbling." Ron and Hermione laughed.

"It really must be bad there," said Ron, though of course he knew.

As 1:00 approached, Harry said, "By the way, when Dumbledore arrives, don't clear out right away. I want to ask him something with you all there."

Right on time at 1:00, Dumbledore appeared in the Weasleys' fireplace. "Ah, Harry, Hermione, Ron, Ginny, how nice to see you all. I trust you had a pleasant time last night?"

"Well, pretty much," Harry answered, "but some of it was pretty serious; we talked about the stuff that happened last month. So you couldn't say that was 'pleasant,' exactly, but it was probably a good thing." He paused. "Professor, can I ask you a few things before we start the lesson?"

"Certainly, Harry," Dumbledore said. "Go ahead."

"When we were talking about the Department of Mysteries, there was a point when Hermione figured out that I knew what the prophecy was." Dumbledore looked concerned. "I wouldn't tell them what it said; I didn't want to put them in unnecessary danger."

"Although we tried to get him to," admitted Ron.

"But I did decide that it was okay to tell them the part of the prophecy that Voldemort already knew, since they couldn't get in trouble from that. I thought it

couldn't add to their danger. Do you think that was all right, or should I not have even done that much?"

Dumbledore thought for a moment. "It is not an easy question to answer. On the one hand, the less information disseminated about the prophecy, the better, and one cannot be faulted for being too cautious. But for friendships to be close, confidences must be shared, and this prophecy weighs heavily on Harry. I am sure Harry would have liked to tell you all and share his burden, and I know you would have wanted to help him. But he is right, it is too dangerous for you to know. I would say that what he did seems like an appropriate balance."

"It was pretty hard for Neville to hear," said Ginny. "It was easy to understand why. We all felt awful for him. Is what we think true? Did his parents lose their minds protecting him?"

"We will probably never know," said Dumbledore. "The only people in a position to know are the perpetrators. But it stands to reason."

Harry looked puzzled. "But when I saw that scene in the Pensieve, Crouch-the father-said that they were trying to get information on where Voldemort was."

"Yes, that was what was assumed at the time," Dumbledore confirmed. "But the younger Crouch denied involvement, and the other three were disinclined to give any information as to their motivations. I was the only one who knew the prophecy, and I did not wish to make it public, feeling it was likely that Voldemort would rise again. And to have told you that they might have had another motivation for their attack on Neville's parents would have meant telling you of the prophecy, which I was not ready to do, to my regret. I should have recognized at the time that fate was providing me a perfect opportunity to do what I knew, even then, I should have done." He paused. "And what was your second question, Harry?"

"I was wondering if it would be okay if they joined the Occlumency lessons with me," said Harry. "Not that they especially need it, of course, but if they're willing, it would help me a lot. I didn't do very well with it last year, and I thought part of the reason might be that I didn't have anyone I could share the experience with, who could know exactly what I'd been through."

Dumbledore looked at the others, asking them a silent question. They all nodded. "Normally I would hesitate, Harry, as lessons for four may necessitate a different approach than lessons for one, and your situation is unique. But you make a good point about the advantages of companions. I warn you, however, that some aspects of this may involve things that are quite personal being shared or known. Does this disturb any of you?"

Three heads shook as one, and Ron shook his a second later, looking embarrassed that he was the only one who hesitated. "I did not think it would,"

continued Dumbledore, "but it was necessary to ask. Well, shall we get down to it, or did you have another question?"

"Yes, Professor," said Harry. "When we were talking in your office a few days ago, you said, 'One of the great but not well understood truths of life is that what we do to another, we do to ourselves.' What does that mean, exactly? That's not literally true, is it?"

"In a physical sense, no, but it is real enough nonetheless. One could say that it is psychically true, or spiritually true. If you do a kindness for another, one done with no thought of compensation or expectation, you feel better about yourself. So, in essence, you have done a kindness to yourself. If you harm another, it is because you yourself have been harmed. A perfectly content and happy person would never deliberately harm another; the thought would never occur. The harm that you do another comes from the harm that has been done to you, and reinforces it. Doing harm becomes acceptable, and a cycle of harm is perpetuated. This is very damaging, so in harming another, you harm yourself. If you kill another, you do not literally kill yourself, but you kill a part of yourself-the part that can look in the mirror and not be disturbed. You have done something to another that can never be rectified, and the damage to yourself can never be fully repaired. I could give more examples, but I think you understand my point. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes, I guess so," Harry said. "I had never thought of it that way before, but it makes sense. I asked because last night I was telling them about what happened in the Department of Mysteries, after Sirius died, when I chased after Bellatrix Lestrange. I didn't tell you this, but at one point after I caught up with her, she taunted me about Sirius, and I lost all control. I-"

"I was aware of it, Harry. Even though I was not in the room, I am sensitive to... certain types of spells within a certain radius, and that one was impossible not to notice. I assume that you are now thinking of your action in terms of what I said, that your action may have caused grievous harm to yourself?" Harry nodded again.

"I would say that you are right to be concerned, and that the very fact that you are concerned is reason to think that you should not be overly concerned. The primary factor to consider here is the overwhelming stress you were under. It is literally difficult to imagine more stressful circumstances. I would be deeply concerned if you had done what you did with forethought and deliberate intent, or if you had been able to sustain the spell. I assume the spell's effects were brief?"

"Yes, very brief. She told me that you have to enjoy inflicting pain to make it work for any length of time. She almost seemed pleased that I'd done it, now that I think about it."

"I would hardly be surprised. What you did could be described as a small step in the direction of the Dark forces. No doubt she would have been pleased to see you make more steps in that direction. That is how people end up as Dark wizards, in many cases: a succession of small steps, moral compromises, ignoring of the conscience, and a slowly growing lust for power and dominance. That is how it sometimes happens. But it can also happen another way: if a person suffers a terrible loss or defeat and succumbs to the darkness instead of fighting his way through it, the transformation to darkness can be very rapid. Bellatrix Lestrange may have been hoping that would happen with you, her taunting designed to push you along such a path. She informed you of how to make the pain caused by the spell last longer to give you incentive to try again. If I may ask, what were the exact words of her taunt?"

Harry told him; Dumbledore nodded somberly. "I am not surprised. Like their master, the Death Eaters see love as insipid, useless, a weakness. He trains them to banish it, to despise it. She wanted you to see it as a weakness, to feel ashamed of it. Banishing love is another step towards darkness. Now, bear in mind, the word 'love' is often misunderstood as referring only or primarily to romantic love. Love is equally appropriately used to describe bonds of friendship, closeness, and affection. There is a famous Muggle quote: 'No greater love hath a man for his fellow man than that he lay down his life for him.' The love you felt for Sirius was so great that the pain of losing him was equally great, and it was this pain that she hoped to capitalize on.

"To get back to the original thrust of your question, you did cause yourself harm by your actions, but it was a temporary harm. It was of a cautionary nature, the type in which a child touches a hot stove and so learns not to do so again. I think it is highly likely that if you ever found yourself in a similar situation, you would not do what you did this time. Not because you would consciously choose differently-you did not consciously choose in this incident-but you would unconsciously choose differently."

Harry fervently hoped that Dumbledore was right. He was willing to take it on faith for the time being, as he was with anything Dumbledore said. "Thank you, Professor." Dumbledore tilted his head in acknowledgment.

"Shall we begin the Occlumency lesson, then?" Dumbledore asked. Harry and the others exchanged glances and nodded. Dumbledore conjured four cushiony, comfortable chairs and gestured them to sit, which they did.

"Firstly, Harry, I would like you to describe in some detail the nature of the lessons you received from Professor Snape last year. It will help me in choosing where to start." Harry spent the next five minutes giving Dumbledore the highlights of his lessons with Snape, and Snape's methods. Harry thought he saw Dumbledore's

face cloud up a few times during the account, which was remarkable, because Dumbledore almost never showed any negative emotion. He soon discovered that he wasn't the only one who had noticed.

"Thank you, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I now have a good idea of where to begin. Yes, Hermione?" he asked, seeing her hand in the air.

"Professor, you don't approve of what Professor Snape did with Harry, do you? I could see it in your face, and that's very rare for you."

He nodded. "You are quite perceptive, Hermione. But yes, I am human, and my feelings will show in my face from time to time. I would have preferred that these did not, because a fundamental rule of teaching at Hogwarts is that teachers do not criticize each other in front of students. But your question deserves an answer.

"No, I do not approve of how Professor Snape handled Harry's lessons. The largest problem was that he simply told Harry to clear his mind, without giving any specific instruction on how to do so. There are methods, disciplines, practices, which Professor Snape knows. He seems to have utilized a 'learn by doing' approach. His approach is technically defensible; no doubt there are some instances in which it could work. But I do not think he chose this method because he thought it would be efficacious."

"In other words, he did it so that he could have an excuse to beat up on Harry mentally," said Ron angrily.

"I would not put it that way, Ron, but I can see why you would," allowed Dumbledore. "Professor Snape may well have thought that his way was best. I cannot know his intentions for certain."

"But you suspect them, or you wouldn't be upset about it," Hermione noted.

"I would be disturbed in any case, because the instruction Harry received was counterproductive," Dumbledore explained, not exactly addressing Hermione's comment. "It is a necessary part of learning Occlumency that the instructor attempt to break into the student's mind; practice is as necessary as learning theory. But I will not do so here for at least three or four lessons. First, I will attempt to help build the skills that will enable you to clear your minds. This will help you gain greater confidence when we do actual practice."

Dumbledore then proceeded with the lesson, explaining the fundamentals of relaxation, clearing one's mind, and dealing with distractions. He had them try it for a minute or two three times. He asked them how well they felt they did and what their problems were. After a little over an hour, he called a halt.

"I think that will do for now," he said. "We will resume on Wednesday, the same time and place. In the meantime, I urge you to practice clearing your minds at least three or four times a day, and especially before going to bed. It is not only

useful for the sake of the class, but also for your general well-being." Dumbledore then bade them farewell and departed.

Harry was the first to speak. "Well, that was way better than any class I had with Snape, to put it mildly. It actually left me feeling more like I might be able to clear my mind, not less."

"He was really upset about what Snape did to you, I could tell," said Hermione. "For him, that was practically an emotional outburst. I'd love to be a fly on the wall when he talks to Snape about it."

"Snape'll just lie, and deny that he wanted to harm Harry," pointed out Ron.

"Could he lie to Dumbledore?" asked Ginny.

"It's hard to say," said Harry. "I wouldn't think so, because this is Dumbledore. But then again, we think Snape's serving as a spy for the Order, which would mean that he could lie to Voldemort. And if he can do that, maybe he can lie to Dumbledore."

"I don't know... I'd never bet against Dumbledore being able to overcome any wizard's magic," said Ron.

"Good point," agreed Harry.

"Well, what do you think, Harry?" asked Ron. "D'you want to hang out here for a while, maybe have dinner with us? Or do you think the Dursleys'll miss you if you come home late?"

"I don't know... I hadn't really thought about it. They don't care whether I'm there or not, for the most part, so long as I don't bother them. On the other hand, I don't know what their reaction will be if I come traipsing through the fireplace at, say, 10:30 when they're watching the telly. I just hate to go back; it's like volunteering to step into a prison when you could be free. I don't know what I should do."

"I hate to say it, Harry," said Hermione, "but the prudent thing to do is to go home now, or at least in a few hours, maybe 4:00 or 4:30. Definitely before your uncle gets home, whenever that is."

"That's usually around quarter to six," supplied Harry.

"Okay, no later than five, then. Sometime tonight, explain your situation with the Occlumency lessons, and say that some days you'd like to stay over at the Weasleys' for dinner, and ask what they think would be a good time for you to come home. Because you don't want to disturb them by using the fireplace when they're watching TV, and so on."

"Or, I could come home at two a.m., when they're in bed for sure," joked Harry. "No, I suppose you're right. I'll try it your way."

"That's great, Harry. Did you hear that, Ron? Harry said, 'No, I suppose you're right. I'll try it your way.' You ought to give that a try once in a while, too," teased Hermione.

Ron gave her a 'very funny' look. "I'll be sure to do that, Hermione. Just as soon as I get through reading 'Hogwarts: A History.' Should be any day now."

"Is anybody else hungry?" asked Ginny, derailing Ron and Hermione.

It turned out that they all were, so they trooped into the kitchen to see what was around. They ate, then talked for a while. Eventually, regretfully, Harry headed back to Privet Drive.

Chapter 6

The End of Summer

The next three weeks passed by far more quickly than summers usually did for Harry. The highlights were, of course, Dumbledore's Occlumency lessons. It was always good to see Dumbledore; he exuded a calm and strength that Harry found magnetic. He and the others felt they were making good progress with Occlumency. They were better able to reach a relaxed state before going to bed, and had increasing success at blocking Dumbledore's attempts to penetrate their defenses during practice sessions. Harry also felt that his increased focus on mental calm was helping his tolerance of living at four Privet Drive.

Harry soon took to going to the Burrow far earlier than was necessary, usually soon after nine in the morning, and so ended up spending most of the day at the Burrow even if he had no Occlumency lesson, as Petunia and Vernon didn't care whether or not he was around, as long as he didn't use the fireplace in front of them. Between those long visits and the Occlumency lessons, Harry ended up spending more time around Ginny than he ever had, and by the end of the summer, found himself thinking of her more and more as part of their group.

In the last week of the Occlumency lessons, Dumbledore started taking extra time at the end of the lessons to work with Harry on developing the right state of mind to repel any future attempts by Voldemort to access Harry's mind, or take him over as had happened at the Department of Mysteries. Harry could see how it was related to Occlumency, as Dumbledore had said earlier. He followed Dumbledore's advice, but said little about it during the lessons because of his embarrassment at the presence of the others, who were the natural ones to think of when trying to access the feelings Dumbledore advised him to. Part of him wanted to request privacy for that portion of the lesson, but he couldn't bring himself to ask; he didn't

want to seem to be shutting the others out, after they'd supported him by taking lessons they didn't have to, for his sake.

Things at Privet Drive had not changed much since Dumbledore's visit. Vernon and Petunia did not harass Harry, but were still cool and distant. An arrangement had been worked out in which Harry could use the fireplace during certain designated hours. Dudley, to Harry's relief, did not ask further questions about the magical world, but was fairly amiable, and continued to treat Harry as a respected equal.

At the end of the first Occlumency lesson after Draco Malfoy's disciplinary hearing, Harry asked Dumbledore what would happen with Malfoy. Hermione, Ron, and Ginny looked unusually attentive. Looking amused, Dumbledore said, "Normally, the deliberations of the Wizengamot would be a matter of the utmost secrecy, and I would refrain from commenting. However, as Lucius Malfoy still has friends on the court, the deliberations will probably be common knowledge soon enough. I must ask, however, that what I say not go beyond you four." They nodded their assent.

"Mr. Malfoy will not receive the full penalty possible," Dumbledore said as Harry's heart sank. "The court considered several factors, including the fact that it was Mr. Malfoy's first offense, and that there was sufficient ambiguity surrounding the circumstances--that is, why Mr. Malfoy's spells were ineffective if no one was blocking them--to cause many to feel that making an example of Mr. Malfoy was not appropriate. The court does not like to crack down unless the facts are certain."

"A lot of them were ready to crack down on me last year," Harry muttered.

"Some were, but not nearly a majority, as you doubtless recall," pointed out Dumbledore. "This was in spite of considerable pressure from the leadership of the Ministry to do so. As I was saying, on the charges of standard underage magic--the spells used against Mr. Dursley--the court issued Mr. Malfoy a stern warning, assuring him that any further offenses would lead to the breaking of his wand. On the charges of using spells, especially violent spells, against a Muggle--a charge separate from underage magic, as no unauthorized wizard of any age is permitted to use spells against a Muggle--and underage use of Disapparation, the court took slightly harsher action. Mr. Malfoy will not be allowed to use magic outside of Hogwarts, or apply for an Apparation license, until his eighteenth birthday. In essence, there will be a one-year delay for his assuming the rights and privileges of an adult wizard."

He was interrupted by brief cheers and exclamations of "Yes!" from Harry, Ron, and Ginny. Hermione looked satisfied but said nothing.

"If I may continue..." Dumbledore said tolerantly. "He was also warned that he would do well to avoid any future altercations with you," gesturing at Harry, "or Mr. Dursley, and that if there were any that came to the court's attention, the weight of suspicion would fall heavily on him." He paused. "There was considerable division

within the Wizengamot on this matter. Some wanted to let him off with a mild warning; others wanted to, as the Muggles say, throw the book at him. The final decision was essentially a compromise."

"It feels that way," Harry agreed. "It's not as much as he deserves, but it's more than I thought he would get. So, I guess I'm satisfied. By the way, I was wondering... if you hadn't been there, I would have used the Protection Charm on Dudley. If that had happened, do you think I would have suffered consequences?"

Dumbledore considered this. "It is difficult to say. Your past might have counted against you, but they would have been defensive spells only. In addition, as you pointed out to Mr. Malfoy, 'the Boy Who Lived is back in favor at the Ministry,' so there probably would have been no consequences." Harry looked embarrassed. "I assume you said that to Mr. Malfoy in order to shake his confidence, and to goad him into using magic first."

Harry nodded. "I was trying to get him angry. I figured it would make him more likely to make a mistake. It looks like it succeeded, just not in the way that I expected."

"Professor, I have a question," said Hermione. Dumbledore gestured at her to go ahead. "It seems like a strange coincidence that you happened to be the one following Harry at that time, especially since he was just going from Arabella Figg's home to the Dursleys'. It isn't just a coincidence, is it?"

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "I am not surprised that you should be the one to make that connection, Hermione. At times, you remind me rather strongly of a young Minerva McGonagall. She also had a very sharp mind at an early age."

Hermione blushed. "Thank you, Professor. That's quite a compliment."

"To answer your question, no. There was... intelligence to suggest that the event was about to occur. Given the likelihood that Harry could be forced to use magic to defend himself, I decided to observe the situation personally."

Harry would have loved to know the nature of this intelligence, but knew better than to ask. He recalled, though, that the last person he saw in Dumbledore's presence before he left Hogwarts was Professor Snape. He smiled inside as he pictured Malfoy's face if he ever discovered that.

Harry woke up late on Sunday morning and went downstairs to find that Vernon and Petunia were already gone. Dudley was sitting at the kitchen table, eating his favorite sugared cereal. Harry asked where they had gone.

"Dad's golfing, and Mum's out shopping with her friends. They said they wouldn't be back until seven or so, and they'll get takeaway for dinner. So at least I can eat as much of this as I want without Mum sniping at me." He grinned. "So, what're you up to today?"

"I'm going over to the Weasleys' at about two, and from there we're going to Diagon Alley. That's kind of like downtown London for wizards," Harry explained. "All the shops are there. Have to buy books and supplies and stuff for the next term. Every year, we meet Hermione there and make a day of it."

"What kind of shops do they have there?"

"Some of them are the usual kind, like there are bars, restaurants, an ice cream parlor, and a pet shop," Harry explained. "And then there are some you wouldn't find in London, like the wand shop, the magical antiques shop, the Quidditch supplies shop, and Fred and George's new joke shop... which reminds me, I'm going to pick up the Skiving Snackbox for you, but there's something I need to tell you about first."

"What's that?" asked Dudley between mouthfuls of cereal.

"Actually, if there's enough of that left, I wouldn't mind some, too," said Harry. Dudley shook the box, determined that there was enough, and gestured for Harry to help himself. Harry got out a bowl and a spoon, and sat down at the table.

"Thanks," he said as he poured the cereal. "About the Snackbox... Professor Dumbledore told me the other day that he put another spell on them when he made sure that your magic sensor wouldn't go off. It's kind of a precaution, since this is against wizarding law and everything."

Dudley nodded in acknowledgment. "And...?"

"It's going to sound a little odd, but he put a Forgetfulness Charm on the box. What that means is, the owner of the box may not forget he has them, but as soon as he thinks of giving them to anyone else, he'll develop a temporary loss of memory. He won't remember he has them, and it'll be like... you know how you sometimes get up to do something, and then forget what you were going to do? It's like that. You'll forget what you were going to do."

"What's the point of that?" Dudley asked.

"In this case, it's extra protection to make sure they don't fall into the wrong hands," Harry explained. "He was concerned that you might try to share them with friends, so you could skive off together. The friend might use them incorrectly, and the symptoms could become severe, and so on. He wants to make sure only you use them. So if you get inclined to share them, you'll forget what you were thinking about, and you won't do it."

Dudley rolled his eyes. "That seems like a bit much trouble to go to... he could've just asked me."

Harry finished chewing a mouthful of cereal. "Yeah, but he knows that people our age don't always do what's prudent. He just wanted to be safe."

"So why did you have to tell me? I would just forget if I tried, so I didn't really need to know, right?"

"Once you have them, yes, that's true," Harry agreed. "But the charm will cause a problem with me getting them to you. See, the charm won't only work on you; it'll work on me, and anyone else. When I get to the shop, Fred and George may not remember that they have the box set aside. I'll tell them where it is, and they'll give it to me. I'll take it home, but if I think about giving it to you, I'll forget to do so."

Dudley looked confused. "So, how am I going to get the box?"

"You'll have to ask me for it," Harry said. "Then I'll remember, though for how long, I can't say. You may have to ask me more than once. I'm telling you this so you'll know I'm not being deliberately stupid, when it happens."

"I'll try to keep that in mind," said Dudley, grinning. "But won't I forget to ask you for it?"

"No, it only applies to the current owner of the box. But once you get it, if you wanted to mention something about it to me, you might forget. I'm not certain if you'll forget only if trying to give it away, or just if trying to mention it. I haven't really used this charm much before."

"Is anything in your world simple?" Dudley wondered. Harry chuckled.

"Seems not, sometimes. In my first year there, I was getting big surprises every other week. The biggest one, of course, was not knowing I was famous. It took a long time to get used to having everyone recognize me because of the scar, and having these big reactions, like they were meeting the Pope or something. Very weird."

"But not everyone likes you, though. What'd Malfoy do to tick you off?"

"It was his natural charm, which you saw personally a few weeks ago." They both chuckled. "Actually, he was being friendly at first, but it was clear that to be his friend, you had to agree with what he thought." He explained how Malfoy felt about pure-blood wizards and Muggles, but again emphasized that it was a minority view in the magical world. "So he's insulting Ron up one side and down the other because they're a bit on the poor side, and they're known for their fondness for Muggles. I'd spent time with Ron on the train, and I could tell he was a good guy. So I basically told Malfoy where to go. Been a dependable enemy ever since."

"Those two always with him?"

"Yeah, it's pretty amazing, I almost never see him without them. One of the few times I did, I thought of saying, 'Hey, where's Moe and Curly?'" Dudley snickered. "Unfortunately, I realized I couldn't, because he knows nothing about the Muggle world. In fact, for him it's a point of pride that he knows nothing about the

Muggle world. No point in insulting someone if they don't know they're being insulted."

"Yeah, I see your point," said Dudley, as he poured another bowl of cereal. "What's his problem with Muggles, anyway? Did some beat him as a child or something?"

"No, but he was raised to think that way. Some wizards just take it for granted that they're better than Muggles; that's the crowd that tends to support Voldemort. I don't even know why they think that. Of course, they think they're better than other wizards, especially those who have Muggle blood. Like, Hermione is Muggle-born, both of her parents are dentists. He's always saying the most foul things about her. And they think they're better than pure-blood wizards who aren't rich, like the Weasleys. So, they think they're better than pretty much everybody. I guess some people like to think they're better than everyone else."

"Well, you do see that a lot," agreed Dudley. "Thing is, it always seems like Mum and Dad think they're better than wizards." Harry noticed that Dudley was giving him a strange look, as if unusually curious to see how Harry reacted to this.

Harry thought about it. "It does seem that way, but I'm not sure they really believe it. I mean, I do think they don't like it; they don't much like anything that doesn't fit their definition of normal. Look at how they reacted to your magic sensor."

Dudley smiled. "Dumbledore was right, my friends really like it. Only problem is, they kept on asking me where I got it. Couldn't very well tell them."

"What did you end up telling them, then?" Harry asked curiously.

"Said I got it from a street vendor in London, so they can't go looking for it."

"Good idea," Harry said. "Anyway, what I think is that they're very scared of the wizarding world, going back to my mum being killed. I think I only realized it in the past month, after the thing with Malfoy, but it makes sense. You remember that when I was a kid, even before I went to Hogwarts, your parents, especially your mum, would go berserk at anything that happened that couldn't easily be explained. They knew what it meant, even if I didn't, and I think it really scared them. So I don't think it's really like what Malfoy and his type think."

"Yeah, but it isn't only wizards that Dad disapproves of," Dudley pointed out. "He doesn't like immigrants, people on the dole, men with long hair, women executives... I'm sure there's a few others. He thinks he's better than them."

"Obviously, I don't agree with a lot of what your father thinks, but it's still different, I think. If the immigrants would go back to their home country, if people on the dole would get a job, if men with long hair got it cut, if women executives stayed home and became housewives, if wizards stopped using magic, he would

approve of them. There is no one who your father would disapprove of if they did exactly what he thought they should do."

"Then who would he complain about?" wondered Dudley jokingly.

"Dunno, maybe he'd be happier. Anyway, I think you see what I mean. But the people Malfoy disapproves of, most of them couldn't change to get his approval if they wanted to. Muggles can't become wizards, mixed-blood wizards can't become pure-blood, poor can't become rich. He dislikes them for things they can't help, so I think it's pretty different from your father."

"Didn't think I'd ever see you defending him," said Dudley.

"Let's just say I think I understand him a bit better, and most of all, I can sympathize with your parents being extra careful to see that you don't get killed."

"So, how did you start getting into trouble at your school, anyway? Tell me about all that stuff that's happened to you."

Harry looked at the clock. "Well, I can't tell you all of it, since I have to go in two and a half hours," he half-joked. "But I'll get started, anyway."

He launched into the story, starting at the beginning with the events of the first year. Dudley interrupted once in a while to ask questions. As 2:00 approached, Harry was finishing up his account of the third year.

"...so Hermione and I are in our beds, and as far as anybody knows, we've been there since we were brought in unconscious. They all come in, Snape is screaming that I must have helped Sirius escape. 'Out with it, Potter, what did you do?'" Harry smiled. "Funny thing is, he was right, he just couldn't explain why or how. So now Fudge thinks Snape's losing it, and they all leave. On the way home on the train, I got an owl from Sirius, telling me he was safe. So, he didn't end up being cleared like he should have been, but at least he was free."

"But the other guy, the one who was the rat, did he find his way back to Voldemort?" asked Dudley.

"I'm afraid that'll have to come under the heading of 'to be continued,'" Harry said. "I've got to get going in a few minutes."

"Okay, but you should have let Lupin and Sirius kill Pettigrew. He deserved it."

"I agree that he deserved it. But there's just something about cold-blooded murder that I can't bring myself to accept. I couldn't have it done in my name."

"But suppose," asked Dudley, "that sometime in the future you've got Voldemort dead to rights. For whatever reason, you can't capture him; your two choices are, kill him, or he gets away. Would you kill him then?"

The question chilled Harry, for reasons Dudley could not know; the prophecy's words strongly suggested that Harry might well be faced with that very choice someday. He answered as honestly as he could.

"I should kill him. I know that, here," he said, pointing to his head. "I just don't know if I can get myself to do it. I suppose I'll find out if the time ever comes."

Harry got up and walked to the fireplace, Dudley following. Dudley said, "Have a good day. And thanks for telling me all that. I'd like to hear the rest sometime."

"No problem."

"Oh, and don't forget the Snackbox." Dudley was smiling at his own joke.

Harry laughed. "I'll get it, but after that, you'll have to not forget for me. Bye."

Dudley said "Later," as Harry shouted "The Burrow!" and stepped into the fire.

Harry walked out of the Burrow's fireplace and was met by the whole group: Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Ron, Ginny, and Hermione. They all greeted him with variations on 'Hello, Harry,' except for Mrs. Weasley, who said, "Hello, Professor," and rubbed his head in greeting. Ron rolled his eyes.

"Do you have to call him that every time you see him, Mum? Can't you see it embarrasses him?"

Mrs. Weasley's tone suggested that that was the most absurd notion she'd ever heard. "Does that embarrass you, Harry, dear?"

Harry smiled. "Well, a bit, yeah," he admitted. "But I know that's not why you're doing it," he hastily added.

"You know we're all proud of you, Harry," said Mr. Weasley. Ginny and Hermione ostentatiously agreed.

"Yes, we know that, Mum's mentioned it to him a dozen times or so," said Ron.

"Well, I'll stop doing it if Harry asks me to," sniffed Mrs. Weasley.

Harry turned to her. "Mrs. Weasley, didn't you say once that you considered me like part of the family?"

"Of course, Harry, dear! You know that!" She looked concerned at the thought that he even needed to ask that it be confirmed.

"Well," said Harry, deadpan, "it seems to me that if I were a member of the family, you'd just say, 'I'll tell him as many times as I like, and I don't care if it embarrasses him.'"

Hermione and the Weasleys burst out laughing, even Mrs. Weasley. Ginny said, "Well, it's obvious that he's spent enough time here to know how things work."

Everyone was ready, and one by one they stepped into the fireplace, shouting "Diagon Alley!"

They made sure everyone was accounted for before setting out. After a stop at Gringotts to pick up some gold, Mrs. Weasley suggested that they go to Flourish & Blotts to get the year's books before doing anything else. Harry had brought his booklist, but it was going to be very easy. Sixth and seventh years only needed one book for each class, and it was always the same one. The title was, 'The Standard N.E.W.T. Guide to...' followed by the course name. He would only need five books, Ron eight, and Hermione, ten.

"How did you decide which books we were going to use, Harry?" Ginny asked.

"I didn't, really," he answered. "I asked Dumbledore and McGonagall to choose the books for me. They're really only for reference, anyway. Dumbledore advised me not to teach from the book. For the fifth years, I may teach somewhat with O.W.L.s in mind, but in general, I'm going to try to teach people what they need to know to survive a dangerous situation."

"Good idea, Harry," said Ron, smiling. "Stick with your expertise."

Harry smiled back, but Mrs. Weasley gave Ron a that's-not-funny look.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione purchased their books and waited for Ginny, whose books weren't so easy to find, having different titles. After she finished, Mrs. Weasley asked everyone to bind up their books and give them to her.

"Hey, let's go to Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes," suggested Harry. "I've really been looking forward to seeing their place."

"You go on ahead, dears," said Mrs. Weasley. "Arthur and I are going to try out that new restaurant at the end of the street. We'll find you when we're done." The Weasleys said goodbye and walked in the other direction.

Harry looked at the others in puzzlement. "Was that because they're hungry, or do they not want to see the shop?"

"They've seen the shop already," Ginny explained, "and according to Fred and George, Mum can't manage to say anything nice about it. I think Mum doesn't want to risk a row with all of us there."

"That's too bad," said Harry. "I'm still glad I gave them the money, though. So, where is it exactly?" Ron and Ginny had been there before, and led the way.

"Are they still doing well?" Hermione asked. "Those were pretty wild dragon hide jackets they were wearing at King's Cross in June."

"Yeah, still doing well, especially since then-as school's out, there are more young customers," said Ron. "And Mum wasn't especially impressed with the jackets, either."

Harry shook his head in wonder. Why couldn't Mrs. Weasley, normally a kind person, be happy that her sons were doing what they were happy doing, and making quite a good living at it as well?

As they entered the shop, Harry saw some items in the front window that he'd seen at Hogwarts, and a couple of posters which advertised products, except that the people and things in these posters moved, of course. One poster repeatedly showed a student taking a Nosebleed Nougat, being excused from class, and relaxing outside in the sunshine under a tree. The other, larger poster displayed images of the Weasley's Wildfire Whiz-bangs, the fireworks that Fred and George had used to such great effect on Dolores Umbridge's first day of her short reign as Hogwarts' Headmistress.

Fred was behind the counter, and his face lit up when he saw the four of them. "Hey, George, get out here," he shouted. To them, he said, "Thought we'd be seeing you around this time. So, Harry, Hermione, what do you think?"

"It's brilliant," said Harry. He was looking around in wonder at all the products. He recognized a few of them from having seen them at Hogwarts, but there were many he had never seen. "How did you get so many products going so quickly? I had no idea you were doing this much."

"Well, what did you think we were doing at Hogwarts, studying?" asked George cheerfully as he walked in from the back room. "No indeed, we were hard at work, just not the sort of work the school expects or appreciates. No school-sponsored outlets for our creative energy existed."

"True genius is often not recognized," agreed Harry. He was joking, but he felt there was some truth to it as well.

"Exactly! See, he understands," enthused Fred. "But Harry recognized it, though. After all, it is only because of dear Harry's mental instability--"

"You mean, generosity," George corrected him.

"-yes, generosity, thank you-that we are able to have this shop at all. We salute you, Harry, as do the thousands of youngsters that we dearly hope our products will get into a lot of trouble."

"And you two were the first of those youngsters, from what I hear," observed Hermione. Fred and George's faces formed into almost identical what-can-you-do expressions.

"Mum'll come around," said George, "it's just taking her a bit longer to get used to it than we thought it would. That's one reason to move out-the less she sees of us, the more she'll miss us, which would be a good thing right now."

"Anyway, I have to agree with Harry, it's very impressive," said Hermione, picking up a quill. "I've never seen this before. It's called an Invisi-Quill?" she asked, reading the label. "What does it do, write in invisible ink?"

"Ah, nothing so simple, dear girl," assured Fred, as she frowned at him for 'dear girl.' "No, this is one of our most diabolical goodies. It bewitches the paper, not the ink. You start to write, and the ink disappears exactly one minute after it hits the paper. The unfortunate victim will think it's a problem with the quill, and put it aside, but the same thing will continue to happen as long as the same paper or parchment is used. Really quite nasty."

"We're debating a disclaimer suggesting it not be used on people with heart conditions," said George.

"Yes, well, the problem is that once you start with disclaimers, there's no end to it," pointed out Fred. "Should we put disclaimers on our fake wands, saying 'Do not use this to cast or block spells?' It's a bad precedent. No, we must rely on the intelligence and maturity of our customers."

"Many of whom will be children," Hermione pointed out.

"Exactly," agreed Fred. "So they won't bother to read disclaimers anyway."

Hermione opened her mouth, then paused, seemingly debating how to respond. Harry chuckled. "These are really nice wrappers on the products. Did you do all these as well?"

"No, our art is confined to humor and mayhem. Lee did all of the packaging; you recall he's quite good with a pen," said George. "We've been giving him steady work all summer; he'll be starting his new job soon, and we still have new product lines to roll out."

"Even more? My, you have been busy little beavers," said Hermione, impressed.

"Well, really, we got in a lot of relaxing at Hogwarts," said Fred. "Now we're doing exactly what we want to do, so who needs to relax? I mean, Hermione, it would be like if somebody paid you to study every day. Wouldn't you think that was the best job in the world?"

Ron laughed out loud; Harry and Ginny successfully muffled their giggles. "See, I try to compliment you, and this is what I get," said Hermione, affecting a put-upon manner.

"Sorry, Hermione, but that's not going to work. We've gotten that from Mum for so long, we're immune to it," said George.

Deciding he'd better do it now before he forgot, Harry said, "Professor Dumbledore was in here a few weeks ago, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was," said George.

"It was an honor," agreed Fred. "He was very complimentary. Said something about how we'd found our true calling. He bought a few things, as well, which was even more complimentary. He said they were Christmas presents."

"I wonder who Dumbledore gives Christmas presents to," said George. "Must be a very select group."

"He had you set something aside," Harry said. "It was for me. Could you get it for me?"

"Set something aside? Was that you, Fred?"

"No, I think I'd remember that," said Fred. "Are you sure you're not confused, Harry?"

Harry smiled. "No, I think you two are the ones who are confused. Tell you what, go look in whatever place you would put something if you were going to set it aside."

The twins exchanged 'is he crazy?' looks, then George went to a specific desk drawer and opened it. He pulled out a Skiving Snackbox. "Fred, did you put this here?"

"No, must've been you," replied Fred.

"No, I'm sure I didn't," said George. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny all started laughing; all had been present when Dumbledore told Harry about the Forgetfulness Charm. "What's so funny?"

"No way to tell which one of you it was, or maybe it was both," Harry explained. "Dumbledore put a Forgetfulness Charm on the box and asked you to set it aside. It was for me."

"Why the charm, then? Why didn't you just ask us to send it to you?" asked Fred.

Harry spent about ten minutes explaining the situation with Dudley and Dumbledore. Fred and George listened raptly as Ginny, Hermione, and Ron browsed the shop and talked. Finally, both shook their heads.

"I don't know whether to be more surprised at Dudley wanting the box, or Dumbledore letting him have it," said George.

"He's going to assist in the breaking of wizarding law so that a Muggle can skive off his classes. A truly great man, Albus Dumbledore," said Fred, as George nodded solemnly.

"Let's get you a bag for that, Harry," offered George.

As George looked around for a bag, Harry asked Fred, "So, how much do I owe you?" Fred and George burst out laughing, in such a way as to make Harry think he must have said something totally absurd. "What?" he asked them.

"Harry, my lad," said Fred, "if you think for a moment that we will allow you to pay for any merchandise from our shop, then you are even more crazy than you were when you gave us the gold in the first place."

"Absolutely out of the question," agreed George. "Not even open for discussion."

"But we'll forgive your little faux pas, because that's the kind of people we are," said Fred proudly.

Harry smiled. "I suppose I deserved that, for threatening to hex you back then."

"Harry, I don't think you quite understand what you've done here," said George. "If not for you, there would not be this lovely shop in Diagon Alley. We'd be at the Burrow, with little prospect of leaving anytime soon, trying to do an owl-order business, with many fewer products than you see here, and with Mum making frequent comments about our inappropriate career choice. You've changed all of that."

"Well, except for Mum," allowed Fred. "Not much he can do about her. She's a force of nature."

"Maybe I should try a bit harder," said Harry, as the other three wandered over to join them. "I am rather on her good side now, after all."

"You're always on her good side, Harry," pointed out George. "Why now more than any other time?"

Harry looked questioningly at Ron and Ginny. "They don't know?"

Ginny shook her head. "We knew you'd be coming here before school started, and we wanted you to be the one to tell them."

Harry thanked her and Ron, and turned to the twins. "I feel like giving you hints and making you guess, but that wouldn't be fair, since this is so unusual. Dumbledore asked me to be this year's Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

There was ten or fifteen seconds of silence and astonished looks. Finally Fred, wearing a concerned expression, said, "Harry, I wish you would reconsider this. I mean, we've really become fond of you, and we hate to see you do this to yourself. You're so young, you still have so much to live for."

George added, "Don't do it, Harry. Don't take this kind of risk on a reckless whim." He shook his head somberly. "You always have been too ready to confront danger. Now look what's happened."

Ron was chuckling, but Hermione and Ginny did not look pleased at all. "All right, you two, that's enough," said Hermione.

"Where have we heard that phrase before," muttered Fred.

"Can you imagine what Mum would have done if one of her natural-born children had managed to become a Hogwarts teacher at the age of sixteen?" wondered George aloud. "Words fail me."

"You should have seen her when Harry told her," Ron said. "Her voice got so high it was a squeak, and she wouldn't let go of Harry for, like, two minutes or so. If she had a heart condition, I'd have been worried. Even now, she still calls him 'Professor' all the time, and you can tell she's still incredibly proud of him."

"I reckon this is because of what you did with the D.A., Harry?" asked Fred.

Harry nodded, and told them about the D.A. members' O.W.L. results. Fred whistled appreciatively. "Yeah, I can see how that would impress people. You can do it, of course. You just have to be confident."

"And don't take anything off the Slytherins," George added. "Crack down on them if they give you a hard time."

"I've already told him," Ginny assured them. "He'll be fine, and he'll break that jinx. You'll see."

"We do hope our little sister is right," Fred said. "Now, Ron and Hermione, you have to be respectful of the teacher. Don't want him giving you any detentions."

"Harry's only teaching first through fifth years," Ron explained.

"Dumbledore's going to teach the N.E.W.T. classes."

Fred and George exchanged amazed looks. "You know," said Fred, "I think I'm suddenly developing a whole new appreciation for the value of N.E.W.T. classes."

"Quite so," agreed George. "It does seem as though we left the place one year too early."

"No, I think you two left at just the right time," said Harry. "If you hadn't been ready to leave anyway, you couldn't have caused all that mayhem at the end of last year, and it was very important to school morale, even Hermione thinks so. I told them that I think you ought to be given Special Awards for Services to the School."

Fred and George looked uncharacteristically modest. "Thanks, Harry," said George. "but what would we do with that? I mean, except for the fact that it would annoy Percy that we got one and he never did, what good would it do?"

"Well, there's also the fact that your escape is now Hogwarts legend," Harry pointed out. "That's got to mean a fair bit of extra business for the shop."

"That's true," agreed Fred. "We have gotten a lot of business over the summer from Hogwarts students, and they often mention our little rebellion. So that worked out well. Still, it would have been great to take classes from Dumbledore."

"Yeah, we're really looking forward to it," said Ron.

"We should really be moving on," suggested Ginny. They had been at the Weasley' shop for over a half hour.

"I suppose so," agreed Ron.

"I really am glad to see you two doing so well," said Hermione to Fred and George. "It was good to see you again, and I'll be sure to pop in whenever I'm in Diagon Alley."

"See that you do," urged Fred. "And Harry, congratulations. Not that I envy what you'll be doing, but better than the prestige or the job itself is the fact that it means that Dumbledore has a lot of confidence in you. That's the reason to be proud."

"I can't argue with you there," Harry said. "And thanks for this," holding up the bag with the Snackbox in it.

George scoffed. "It's very little. Seriously, Harry, anytime, whether you want a fake wand or a Deflagration Deluxe, just tell us, and it'll be yours on the next owl. Now you all have a good day."

"And a good term," added Fred. "Remember, Harry, no mercy for the Slytherins."

"I'll be reminding him of that, too" said Ginny. "Bye!"

They said their goodbyes and left the shop. Ron suggested they head over to Florean Fortescue's ice cream parlor, and the others agreed. As they approached the parlor, at one of the outdoor tables, they saw Neville and his grandmother. Both stood up as they saw Harry and the others heading their way.

"Neville! It's good to see you again," said Ginny.

"Hi, everyone," said Neville cheerfully. "C'mere, pull another table over next to this one and sit down." They did so

Mrs. Longbottom looked like her usual no-nonsense self. "I'm pleased to see you all again," she said, politely. "Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Professor Potter." The others smiled at Harry's expense, knowing he would be embarrassed. To Harry, she said, "Would you step over here for a moment, please? I would like to have a private word with you. Unless you would like to order first."

Harry wanted to look at Neville to see whether he had any idea of what this was about, but he didn't, as he didn't want Mrs. Longbottom to see him doing so. He told Hermione what he wanted, and she took the others' ice cream orders and went to the counter. Harry walked off with Mrs. Longbottom. When they were far enough away not to be overheard, she regarded him sternly, but with respect.

"First of all, Professor, I wish to congratulate you on your new position. I daresay you will improve on your predecessors' performances."

Harry fought back the urge to say 'it would be hard not to,' feeling that Mrs. Longbottom may not appreciate humor right then. He settled for saying, "Thank you,

but I'm still not used to being called 'Professor.'"

"Well, you had better get used to it. It will happen a lot more, very soon. Now, there are two things I wish to ask you about. Firstly, I would like to know to what you attribute the change in Neville over the past year. You see a great deal of him, so perhaps you have some idea."

Harry considered the question. He had noticed that Neville's focus and effort in D.A. sessions had increased dramatically right after the dementors joined Voldemort, meaning that those who had tortured Neville's parents into insanity were free. He had assumed that Neville felt a greater need to be able to protect himself, or even a desire for revenge, but he didn't want to say any such thing to Neville's grandmother. He didn't know for sure, and it was very personal in any case; Neville hadn't discussed it with him, or anyone else that he knew of. He decided to give the answer he thought he would give if there had been no escape from Azkaban.

"You know, I've wondered about that myself. It's hard to say for sure. The first time I noticed any change was when Malfoy insulted me one day, acting like I was unbalanced and should be sent to St. Mungo's, and said something nasty about the kind of people in St. Mungo's. Neville just lost his temper and went straight for Malfoy. I had to hold him back so he wouldn't get clobbered by Malfoy's minions, then he was angry at me for holding him back. Anyway, I'd never seen him do anything like that before that day.

"Apart from that, being in the D.A. must have helped him; it gave him a focus for his energy. He started working really hard, harder than anyone else in the group. I was amazed at how fast he improved. As his skill increased, so did his confidence. But other than that, I can't say I know what did it."

Mrs. Longbottom nodded. "I understand. Here is my second question: Why did you give Neville the information you did about the prophecy?"

Harry had suspected this might come up. "I didn't tell him deliberately or specifically; I was talking to all my friends, and he was there. Also, I thought he deserved to know. I would have wanted to know if it was me. Do you think I shouldn't have told him?"

She glanced down, and for the first time he saw a small amount of uncertainty and vulnerability in her eyes. "No, that is not what I think. This has been very distressing for Neville, and I wished to understand your motivations. The fact is, when his parents were attacked, Neville was with me, but I did not know about the prophecy or that Neville or his parents might be in any unusual danger. I cannot say whether Frank and Alice knew of the prophecy, or whether that is what they lost their sanity protecting. It is easy to see why you and the others suspect that this is

so. Part of me wishes that Neville had never discovered this. But, as you say, he has a right to know." She paused. "Very well, Professor. Thank you for your time." She headed back to the others, leaving Harry to follow.

They went back to the table, where Ron was urging Neville to visit Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. "...and almost everything there was invented by them personally, so it's not stuff you could get at Zonko's, or anywhere else." Neville said he would be sure to go there, as Mrs. Longbottom suggested to Neville that they move along. Looking a bit disappointed, Neville said goodbye and said he would see them on the Hogwarts Express.

"Why doesn't he resist her more? I mean, he meekly goes along with anything she wants," Ron said. To Ginny, he continued, "I mean, you and I, everyone except Percy, really, we give Mum a good run for her money. Why doesn't he?"

"It's hard to say, Ron," said Hermione. "But you've seen what she's like. She acts as though doing what she says is only common sense, and you're a moron if you don't. But I do agree that that wouldn't stop many children from rebelling. We're all different, I guess."

"I have to wonder what it would be like for Neville if he had been able to grow up with his parents," said Harry. "I sometimes wonder what that would be like for myself. Would I be a different person? If so, how? I guess you can never know, but it's hard not to wonder."

They looked at him sympathetically. "No, we can't know. I guess we're just stuck with what we've got," said Ginny. "It's not fair, though. For you or Neville."

"As my aunt and uncle have said many times, and I assume almost all parents have said to their children..." The rest joined him in saying it: "Life isn't fair."

Harry entered the four Privet Drive fireplace at about 6:30. Dudley was on the sofa, watching TV. "Hey, Harry," he said. "Have a good time?"

Harry found he was still not quite used to Dudley being so amiable with him. "Yeah, pretty good. Got my schoolbooks and supplies."

"Did you get the Skiving Snackbox? I was hoping to get it from you before Mum and Dad get home."

"Snackbox? Oh, yeah, that was pretty funny. Fred and George didn't remember that they had it. Almost started arguing over who forgot about it. I had to tell them about Dumbledore's spell; they didn't know he had done it." He paused, remembering. "Well, I'd better get this up to my room."

Dudley rolled his eyes. "Okay, but could you give me the Snackbox first?"

Harry blinked. "Of course, sorry. Yeah, that was a strong spell Dumbledore put on it. I hope I can be half as strong as he is someday." He looked down at Dudley, who was looking up at him expectantly. "I'm sorry, what were you saying?"

Dudley snickered. "Well, you did warn me that this would happen," he allowed. "Tell you what, why don't I come up to your room with you? I'd like to see what you got."

"Okay, sure," said Harry, wondering why Dudley was so interested. After all, it was only his N.E.W.T. books and a few other things. They went up to Harry's room and sat down on his bed.

"So, what have you got?" Dudley asked.

"Mostly books for my N.E.W.T. classes," Harry said, showing Dudley the books and explaining about O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s. "I'm taking the classes needed to train to be an Auror-Defense Against the Dark Arts, Potions, Charms, Transfigurations, and I'm also taking Care of Magical Creatures, which isn't strictly necessary, but I like it."

Dudley thumbed through the books. "Get anything else?"

"Just some quills and parchment, and..." He pulled out the Snackbox.

"So, is that ringing any bells?" Dudley smiled.

"I was going to... to give you this, right?" Dudley nodded as Harry handed the box over.

"Wow... that was even harder than you said it was going to be," said Dudley. "Now that you don't have the box anymore, are you starting to remember?"

"Yeah, I remember everything now. I don't know if it's just because it's Dumbledore, but that's a powerful spell. I guess that's a pretty good demonstration why not to give them to anybody-if you try, you'll just end up looking stupid."

"Yeah, I'm pretty convinced," said Dudley. "You knew that was going to happen, but it still worked just the same. He wasn't kidding with that spell."

"Fred and George were amazed that he was going to let you have it at all," said Harry. "What did they say exactly... 'He's going to assist in the breaking of wizarding law so that a Muggle can skive off his classes. A truly great man, Albus Dumbledore.'"

Dudley laughed. "What else did you talk to them about?"

"Oh, they gave me a hard time about being a teacher," Harry said. He related their teasing about the jinx on the position. "I told them what happened with you and Malfoy... just catching up on news."

"That reminds me, whatever happened to him?" Dudley asked. "Did he get himself in big trouble?"

Harry explained what the result was. "So, that's pretty good," he concluded. "He'll be very angry, that's for sure. And, really, that's the important thing." They both grinned.

"Is it really that bad? It doesn't sound like much."

"Look at it this way. Would you think it was a big deal if you had to wait a whole year to drive?" Dudley nodded vigorously. "Well, that's what it's like. Apparating is like driving-the freedom to go anywhere you want. Every wizard looks forward to it, like every Muggle looks forward to driving. Trust me, it's a big deal."

"Excellent," Dudley said, now smiling evilly. "Better not tell Mum, though."

"I agree," Harry said. "No need for her to think about Malfoy sitting around with nothing to do but plot revenge."

Just then, the family car drove into the driveway. "Ah, good, they're home," said Dudley. "They'll have takeaway. I'm hungry, just been eating junk all day."

"Me too," said Harry. He'd just had cake and ice cream at Florean Fortescue's. "If you want to come up here after dinner, I'll continue the story from this morning."

Dudley nodded, and they went downstairs.

The following Friday was the day Harry had to leave for Hogwarts. Normally he would take the Hogwarts Express on Sunday, but as a teacher, he had to receive orientation and attend pre-term meetings. He had spent a lot of August thinking about how he was going to teach his lessons-heavy on practice so he wouldn't have to give lectures, which he didn't think he could do-and so wasn't sure he could do much more. The book Hermione gave him had year-by-year charts of what spells and basic information the students should have. He used that as a rough guide, but he hoped to sit down with Dumbledore before the term started, show him the charts and what he planned to do, and ask for guidance.

Harry felt he had done what he could to prepare for going to Hogwarts as a teacher. Still, it was with some trepidation that he got ready to depart on Friday morning. He was double-checking his trunk to make sure it had everything when the phone rang, and he heard Dudley's yell. "Harry! It's Hermione!" Harry ran downstairs. As he walked into the kitchen, Dudley was saying, "Yeah, I hope so... no problem... okay, here he is." He handed the phone to Harry.

"Hermione, how are you doing?"

"Good, I just wanted to say goodbye before you left. Ron did too, but of course he doesn't have a phone, so he just told me in the fireplace to tell you to not worry, you'll do fine. That's what I say, too, of course."

"I know, thanks. I'm sorry I'll have to miss you on the Hogwarts Express. It'll seem strange not doing that this year. Of course, you and Ron will be together in the prefects' car."

"With Malfoy, ugh, I can hardly wait..."

"Don't talk to him, and if he says anything, just ignore him. Talk to Ernie and Hannah. Find out how they feel about the Astronomy thing."

"I'd rather not do that in front of Malfoy, you know what he'll do..."

"Yeah, start a campaign to undermine you. I forgot. Well, there's other things. Talk about the D.A., Malfoy'll love that. If you want, you can tell him about me being a teacher. I mean, I was looking forward to seeing his face at the feast, but if he's really making you crazy, you can go ahead and do it."

"Thanks, Harry. I appreciate it, but I'm not going to. You haven't thought this through. It would be fun for a half hour or so, but it takes five hours to get to Hogwarts, as you know, and the prefects can leave their car after the first hour. What's the first thing Malfoy's going to do?"

Harry sighed. "Walk up and down the train, telling every Slytherin and orchestrating boos, hissing, and throwing things when I'm announced at the feast."

"Exactly. No, it has to be a secret. In fact, I'll talk to Ron, Ginny, and Neville today and make sure they know not to tell anyone. We'll just have to be looking for him in the crowd when Dumbledore introduces you."

"That should be a sight to see. Of course, I'll probably be so nervous I'll forget to look. I mean, when I come out the teachers will applaud, they always do, but what about the students? Everyone will be so stunned, I won't even get polite applause."

"Then just go with it, Harry. Make a joke about it. Tell them that was your first reaction too. My advice is, be yourself. Don't try to make some prepared speech. Imagine you're talking to D.A. members. If Slytherins jeer or shout comments, ignore them, or put them down if you can think of a comeback. Just keep cool. Before you come out, do some of the Occlumency exercises."

"That's a good idea, I hadn't thought of that," Harry said. "Thanks, you're really a fountain of good advice sometimes."

Hermione chuckled. "If anyone else said that, especially Ron, I'd be sure they were being sarcastic. But I know you mean it, and it's nice of you to say so." She paused. "Of course, you don't think it's so good when it's advice about getting your homework done promptly."

"No, I know that's good advice, too," Harry assured her. "It's just good advice I'm not as likely to take."

"One more bit of advice: don't let Snape push you around. Now, you're a teacher, he's a teacher. If he's rude to you, you can be rude to him-except in Potions, of course. But outside that, if he doesn't treat you with the respect he gives other teachers, call him on it. Dumbledore and McGonagall will support you."

"I hope you're right," Harry said. He talked to her for a few more minutes, then hung up and walked upstairs to his room to make sure that everything was in his trunk. He picked up Hedwig's cage, grabbed the trunk's handle, and headed downstairs.

Dudley was on the sofa watching TV. "Are you going to drag that thing into the fire?" he asked, gesturing at the trunk.

"No, they've given me a minor exception to the underage magic rule; I'm allowed to use magic to make the trunk light, so I can carry it easily." He tapped the trunk with his wand, then lifted it. It weighed less than a schoolbook. "What did Hermione say to you on the phone?"

"She thanked me for helping put Malfoy in his place, and said that maybe this year he won't be strutting around like he owns the place. I said I hope so."

"I hope so too, but I'm not optimistic. I'm not sure he knows any other way to act." Harry put out his hand. "Have a good term," he said.

Dudley shook it. "You, too. Let's see if you can keep the number at ten."

Harry laughed. "I'll do my best." He tossed Floo powder into the fire, shouted "Hogsmeade Owl Office," stepped into it, and disappeared.

Chapter 7

Back To Hogwarts

Harry stepped out of the fireplace and was greeted by Professor McGonagall.

"Welcome, Professor Potter," she said, with a smile in her eyes that did not extend to her mouth. Harry was not bothered; he was well used to her undemonstrative nature. She shook his hand, and gestured him out of the room. They exited to find themselves in the main room of the Hogsmeade Owl Office, where over a hundred owls stood ready to make deliveries.

Harry looked around. He had been in this room before on a previous Hogsmeade visit, but not in the room with the fireplace. "Professor, why doesn't this fireplace get used more? Wouldn't it be a lot faster than the Hogwarts Express?" They walked out onto the main street of Hogsmeade, towards the Hogwarts gates.

"Yes, it would, but the Hogwarts Express has been running virtually since the invention of the train," she explained. "It is a tradition we would not like to lose. It

gives the students a chance to renew acquaintances and catch up on news. Also, the Owl Office is not affiliated with Hogwarts, and so we cannot just use it any time we please. We request its use for teachers for whom Apparation is not suitable and other unusual situations." She paused. "Such as a teacher who is not yet old enough to Apparate." He was almost sure he saw a small smile there.

"Professor, how is it going to work with me being a teacher, dealing with the other teachers? I mean, you always refer to each other as 'Professor' when mentioning them to a student, or when talking to each other, unless you're on a first-name basis. How is that going to work with me?" He had been wondering about that for a while.

"Just the same as with any other professor, except when you are actually in classes as a student," she replied. "At those times, you will be treated no differently than any other student, with one exception. You will not be given detentions." Harry looked at her, surprised. "Professor Dumbledore," she continued, "feels that to do so could undermine your authority at the times you are teaching. He will inform you later of the standard of behavior he expects in return for this consideration." Her tone added the message of, 'and if you don't adhere to this standard, you're going to have to answer to me,'

"Basically," Harry guessed, "that I don't do anything that would ordinarily get me given detention?"

"To start with, yes," she answered sternly. "Generally, in my classes you have behaved satisfactorily, though not ideally, so I foresee no problems. But I would personally recommend that you behave as a student in the same way that you would like students in your classes to behave. You will soon find out what it looks like from our side of the fence.

"Now to get back to your question, when not in classes as a student, you will be treated exactly as an ordinary professor would. Other professors will refer to you, in or out of your presence, as "Professor Potter," unless they feel they have your permission to use your given name. If someone does whom you would prefer not to, simply say, 'Professor Potter, if you please,' and they will comply with your wishes."

"I'll believe that when I see it," Harry said. At McGonagall's sharp look, he added, "You know who I mean, Professor. I'll be surprised if he doesn't gag."

"Did I mention, Professor Potter, that we do not criticize fellow professors?"

Harry sighed. "Professor Dumbledore did," he admitted. "Well, I suppose I can do it if he can."

Her face still registered disapproval. "You will do it unconditionally, regardless of the behavior of others. If any teacher steps outside the bounds of appropriate behavior, they will be spoken to by Professor Dumbledore or myself. Most teachers have no difficulty with this. I do not expect that you will either."

"No, Professor, I didn't think I would. It's the teachers who have to do things differently, not me."

They were walking through the Hogwarts gates, Harry still carrying his extra-light trunk over his shoulder. He looked around at all the familiar sights, highlighted by a bright, clear summer day: the lake with the squid, the Whomping Willow, the Quidditch pitch off in the distance, and of course the castle. As they passed Hagrid's hut, McGonagall shouted, "Hagrid! Are you in there?"

From inside the hut, Harry heard a dog barking, and Hagrid shouting "Jus' a minute, jus' a minute." In a few seconds, he came out, saw Harry, and grinned broadly. "Good ter see yeh, good ter see yeh." He patted Harry on the back more lightly than usual; Harry did not go flying forward as he had expected. Harry reached up and patted him on the back; even though Harry had grown a bit over the two summer months, he couldn't come close to reaching Hagrid's shoulder. "A professor! Well, Harry, I got ter say, nothin' yeh do surprises me anymore. I'm as proud of yeh as I was fer myself when Professor Dumbledore made me a teacher. Congratulations."

"Thanks, Hagrid," said Harry. "I'm looking forward to taking your N.E.W.T. class. I bet you'll have some good stuff lined up."

"I will, don't yeh worry. Now, yeh'd better be movin' along there, yeh've got lots ter be doin' today. I'll find yeh when yer not so busy, we'll have a cuppa."

"Good. See you later," Harry said cheerfully. He continued walking toward the castle with McGonagall. "It's good to see him here, like always," Harry commented. "Last year when he wasn't here, we were pretty concerned. It doesn't feel quite right if he's not around."

"I know what you mean, Harry... I'm sorry, I really should say, Professor Potter..."

She paused for a second, and Harry jumped in, hoping not to interrupt.

"Professor, please... I don't plan on calling any teachers by their given name... except Hagrid, of course... but I still want you and Professor Dumbledore to call me Harry if you'd like. It really wouldn't seem right otherwise."

She looked at him with what could be affection, but Harry found it hard to tell.

"Very well, I shall keep that in mind."

They walked up the steps to the main entrance of the castle, and went inside. As it had during his Hogwarts visit a month ago, it seemed too barren to Harry, too in need of students walking and running in the hallways. They'll be here soon enough, he thought. And then they'll be expecting me to teach them.

McGonagall led him to her office. "I always meet with the new teacher first; conducting orientation is one of my responsibilities as deputy Headmistress. This meeting is to let you know what you will be doing over the next two days." She went on to detail them: "There will be a meeting with me to discuss school regulations and

the teacher's general responsibilities, a tour of the grounds, a talk with Professor Dumbledore and I about how you plan to approach your classes, then a private dinner with Professor Dumbledore. Tomorrow, there will be a staff meeting in the afternoon, and a staff feast and social event after dinner. On Sunday, your time will be your own until 6:00, when you will join us at the teachers' table for the students' welcoming feast. Do you have any questions so far?"

Harry shook his head, but he was reeling a bit. A private dinner with Professor Dumbledore? All this seemed so foreign to him, like what someone else should be doing, not him. All he could do, he thought, was go with it, and hope that Dumbledore knew what he was doing.

The first meeting went all right, Harry felt. Professor McGonagall had explained some of the teachers' extracurricular responsibilities, such as occasionally patrolling the grounds and supervising detentions, but explained to Harry that he would be excused from most of them, as he had his studies to attend to. She told him that he would have the usual teachers' prerogatives of assigning detention and taking points from the houses of offenders, not only in his classes, but anywhere in the school except when he was in a class as a student or in Gryffindor Tower. She went over the school rules with him—just for form's sake, as he already knew most of them ("having broken quite a few of them yourself," she added).

They then walked the grounds, but mainly just chatted, as again there was not much that Harry had to be told that he did not know. He enjoyed the walk, as it was a nice day. Hagrid joined them for part of it, giving his perspective on the familiar sights. Back at the castle, Harry went to Gryffindor Tower to unpack his trunk, which a house-elf had undoubtedly taken from where he had left it in McGonagall's office. She had told him that normally she would be showing the new teacher his quarters, but she and Dumbledore knew that Harry would want to stay in his usual Gryffindor quarters, so he went there instead. It felt strange, again, being in the room he had shared for five years with Ron, Neville, Dean, and Seamus, but alone this time. He unpacked his things and flipped through the book he'd gotten from Hermione, reviewing his tentative plans for his classes. At a few minutes before four, he went to Professor McGonagall's office, carrying the book with him. He and McGonagall then set out to Professor Dumbledore's office.

She paused when they reached the gargoyles that guarded Dumbledore's office. "Lemon drop," she said, and they were allowed to pass. The door to Dumbledore's office was open; he was obviously waiting for them.

"Minerva, Harry, come in," said Dumbledore cheerfully. He motioned them to sit down, then did so himself. "Well, Harry, first of all, please tell us what you have in

mind for your classes. You need not be overly detailed. For now, we wish to know how you are generally thinking."

Harry took a deep breath before starting. "Well, I was planning on using this book," he said, holding it up to show them, "as a very general guide as to what to teach at what time. But I also wanted to ask for advice from both of you."

McGonagall looked at Dumbledore, then Harry, in dismay. "The school could have provided you with a copy of that book. You need not have purchased it for yourself," she said.

"I didn't. Hermione bought it for me for my birthday," he explained.

McGonagall and Dumbledore looked mildly surprised. "Quite a gift," she commented.

"That book is not inexpensive."

"I didn't know that," Harry said, slightly surprised. "Well, you know Hermione, nothing's too good when it comes to study."

"Or her friends, it appears," observed Dumbledore. "In any case, yes, Harry, that is a good place to start. What general modifications do you plan to make?"

Harry had thought about this. "I'm thinking in kind of the same way as I did with the D.A.," he said. "Since Voldemort and the Death Eaters are out there, the first thing I want to do is work on the stuff that'll have value against them. So I'll be emphasizing those things and not doing so much on stuff like grindylows, which are on the O.W.L. but aren't really relevant to our situation." He looked at them, waiting to see what they thought.

Dumbledore nodded his approval. "Excellent, Harry," he said. "That is exactly how I hoped you would see it. We are in a difficult time, and so the lessons should be more of a practical nature."

Harry smiled, and related to them Ron's joke in Diagon Alley about Harry's teaching to his expertise of surviving dangerous situations, and Mrs. Weasley's reaction.

Dumbledore nodded. "It is understandable that Molly would think it inappropriate, but Ron was exactly right. I did not choose you as a teacher for your encyclopedic knowledge of everything that might be encountered on an O.W.L. test. You have demonstrated the ability to use these spells in difficult situations, and last year you demonstrated the ability to teach them. Now, have you thought about how you plan to conduct your classes in general? For example, more practice or more lecture, and so forth."

That was easy. "Much more practice, much less lecture," said Harry confidently. "I'm not sure what I would have to say, anyway; as you said, I'm not an expert on most of this. I guess that most of the lesson time will be taken by practice."

"That sounds entirely reasonable," Dumbledore agreed. "But if I may make a suggestion..."

Harry nodded eagerly. Dumbledore continued, "When it is appropriate, you may want to consider occasionally talking about the situations in which you have used some of what you will be teaching them. Tell them about Voldemort. Tell them about dementors; the third years and younger students may never have seen them. If you are comfortable with it, using your personal experiences to illustrate what you are teaching may have a great motivational effect."

Harry considered it; it was not an idea he immediately took to. Talking to strangers about very personal experiences was not something he was keen on; giving the interview to the Quibbler in February had been difficult. But he was prepared to take anything Dumbledore suggested very seriously.

"I hadn't thought of doing that," he said. "But I guess I can see what you mean. When we had that meeting in the Hog's Head last year, I wondered if people had just showed up to find out about what happened last June, and they were pretty impressed when Ron and Hermione were telling them about all the stuff I'd done. I mean, to be honest, it's not something I'm exactly eager to do. But I will... as I think about it, telling them about Voldemort, maybe even spending a whole lesson on it, is probably a good idea," he continued, now thinking out loud. "Half of them will jump out of their chairs when I say the name, but if they start hearing it enough, they'll get used to it... probably most students have this exaggerated fear because of all this business about the name."

"Quite so, Harry. I'm glad you see that," said Dumbledore. "This could be very valuable to the students. Ironically, the fact that you are not eager to do so makes you all the more qualified. It will be obvious that you are not attempting self-aggrandizement." To Harry's puzzled look, McGonagall supplied, "People will know you are not boasting."

"Ah, yes," said Harry, embarrassed that he hadn't known that word. "Okay, well, when I can find a time that seems good, I'll try to do that."

"Good. Thank you, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Now, let's look for any possible lessons in which you might need special supplies, so we can get them for you in advance."

"Oh, wait, there's one other thing I wanted to mention," said Harry. "I know this is usually N.E.W.T. standard, but I'd like to teach the Patronus Charm, or at least try to, to third through fifth years. I know not everybody will get it, but the chances of anyone having to defend themselves against dementors is much higher these days. So I thought that would be a good idea. A fair number of people in the D.A. managed a Patronus before we got caught."

"Of course, Harry, you may do so. To be clear, this chat we are having is not so that we can control and micromanage how you teach your class. You do not have to clear

things with us; you may do as you like in your class. We simply wish to know what you plan to do. We would not be doing our jobs if we did not," Dumbledore said.

Harry nodded, then had a thought, and asked a question which he might not have had he thought about it more. "Professor, did you have a chat like this with Dolores Umbridge?"

McGonagall bristled. "Professor Potter, that is a matter far removed from the purpose of-"

"Minerva," Dumbledore interrupted. She looked at him in surprise; it seemed to Harry that Dumbledore must not have often interrupted her. "Harry suffered sufficiently last year to deserve an answer to his question."

"Suffered?" She looked puzzled, because she knew Dumbledore wouldn't have said what he said without good reason. "Being thrown off the Quidditch team and having three weeks' worth of detentions is unpleasant, I agree, but 'suffer' seems too strong a word for it."

"Minerva, do you recall that before Professor Umbridge left us this year, I had a chat with her, in which she was most forthcoming with truthful answers?" Harry wondered how Dumbledore had managed that, and realized that there was still a lot he didn't know about Dumbledore's abilities.

"Of course, we discussed that. Why?"

"Because she told me what she had Harry doing in those detentions." He then described the pen she had made Harry use to write lines, and how it worked.

McGonagall's mouth dropped open. She stared at Harry, horrified and astonished.

Her mouth moved, but no sound came out for a few seconds. Finally, she managed,

"Why... why on earth did you not come to me and tell me this? I would have put a stop to it even if it meant having to restrain her physically!"

Harry had a determined look on his face; he was remembering those detentions, and the effort it took to endure the pain and not show it. Dumbledore was regarding him seriously. "If you have been watching Harry's face for the past few seconds, Minerva, the reason should be apparent."

She stared at him more intently; he saw realization dawn in her eyes. "It was a battle of wills... you didn't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing she got to you." She was still amazed, but now for a different reason.

"That was the main reason," Harry confirmed. "The other reason was... Ron told me to go to you, that you'd stop it. I said, yeah, but how long until there's another 'educational decree' that says you get sacked for criticizing her? It just wasn't going to do any good in the long run. But, yes, even if I thought you could have stopped it, I wouldn't have done it." Harry wondered, looking at her face, whether he

had been brave, stubborn, or just stupid. All he knew was that it had seemed very important at the time.

"I think," Dumbledore said, "that nobody who knows about this would ever question Harry's toughness. And that is why I feel that Harry deserves an answer to his question. But I think the larger question you have in mind, Harry, is how did things come to pass that she was forced on us in the first place?" Harry nodded. "The fact is that I was outmaneuvered bureaucratically and politically; I did not foresee that particular line of attack. No doubt I should have, and I am sorry that you and others have suffered for it. Once she was in, there was little we could do. It was also true that a few people I approached about the position declined, and we later understood that they were pressured by the Ministry to do so

"Now, to answer your actual question, yes, we did have this chat with her. She told us exactly what she planned to do, which was exactly what she did in fact do. We expressed our concerns; she was adamant, and made sure we knew that her plan had the Ministry's support. We recognized the limits of our power, and made no attempts to press her further. Trying to force her to do as we wished would have failed-you cannot make someone be an effective teacher-and would certainly have prompted further Ministry action, a rationale you will note is similar to what you mentioned a moment ago. Sometimes we must allow something bad to happen so that something worse does not happen later."

Harry understood, and said so. "It was a pretty hard year."

"For us, too, Harry," McGonagall said. "We were not physically tormented in the manner that you were, but the teachers were under siege last year. We could not speak freely in the staff room, and those 'observations...' " She shook her head in disgust at the memory.

That prompted a memory, and Harry smiled; he told McGonagall what satisfaction all the Gryffindors had derived from her treatment of Umbridge when her class was observed. Dumbledore smiled, as did McGonagall, though a small one. "We'd seen her push around so many teachers, it was so great to see. It made us feel better."

"Well, now that the Ministry has its attention more properly focused on Voldemort, we are once again being left alone," said Dumbledore, more or less closing the subject. "We may have challenges this year, but they will be different challenges."

The conversation went back to teaching. Dumbledore and McGonagall gave Harry some tips based on their years of experience. After about an hour, they stopped, and Harry followed Dumbledore to his quarters, where they would have dinner.

Harry walked into one of the few rooms at Hogwarts in which he had never been before. Dumbledore's quarters were larger than Harry expected, with a spacious living room, a study area, and a bedroom. Dumbledore offered Harry a seat in a very comfortable old chair, and sat down on a nearby chair himself.

"So, Harry, how are you feeling about things now?" Dumbledore asked.

"Very strange," Harry said honestly. "Like I'm not where I'm supposed to be. If this was a dream, someone would walk in and discover that I'm just pretending, and I'd be thrown out."

Dumbledore smiled. "Be assured that if anyone comes through the door, it will be a house-elf bringing our dinner. But I know what you mean. The feeling will subside. You will adapt to it, and in a few months, perhaps you will be thinking that being a student is harder than being a teacher."

Harry chuckled lightly, and said, "I hope you're right. That would be nice."

Harry took the opportunity to ask some questions about Hogwarts history; he discovered that Dumbledore had been headmaster for forty-one years, the longest tenure ever. Dumbledore told Harry stories about teachers who had long since gone. Harry was fascinated. He told Dumbledore that he wished there was a class called 'History of Hogwarts,' and that Dumbledore taught it.

"If there were such a course, Harry, then there would have to be a test for it. You would find that stories can be a lot less interesting if you know you will be tested on them. You start looking for the trees, and lose view of the forest."

"Wouldn't that be true of any class?" Harry wondered.

"To an extent, yes," Dumbledore conceded. "But the class you propose would have no value other than entertainment, so testing would ruin it. I'm sure you have noticed that very few of your actual classes could be called entertaining."

Harry grinned. "Well, a few, maybe. The one in third year where Neville put his grandmother's clothes on a boggart pretending to be Professor Snape comes to mind."

"Yes, I heard about that," said Dumbledore. "I believe that Professor Snape was... displeased."

"That's putting it mildly," Harry said, not noticing Dumbledore's deliberate understatement. "He made Neville's life in Potions really difficult for the next few months. Even treated him worse than he treats me, for a while." Harry paused, wanting to ask Dumbledore a question but not sure if he should. He decided to go ahead.

"Professor, were you told the reason that Sn- sorry, that Professor Snape stopped teaching me Occlumency last year?"

"Yes, I was told. Why do you ask?"

"Well... first of all, I shouldn't have looked in the Pensieve. It was a huge temptation, but I still shouldn't have done it, and I know that." He paused, about to continue, but Dumbledore commented first.

"I do not judge you harshly for that, Harry. In fact, I do not judge you at all." At Harry's very surprised look, Dumbledore continued: "I feel that Professor Snape should not have tried to protect his memories by placing them in the Pensieve. It made the situation even more unbalanced in his favor than it already was. He could gain access to your most personal memories without risking his. This is part of the reason that I suspect his motives for using the methods he did. In any case, do continue."

"Well, I saw what my father did to him, and I hated it. My father behaved like a bully. Even if I assume, as Sirius said, that Professor Snape gave as good as he got, I can understand why Snape hated him. But what I'd like to know is, why did he hate me, from the very first? Why blame me for what my father did? I've never understood that."

Dumbledore looked thoughtful. "I would say first that the fact that your father died a hero has a lot to do with it, as does your instant, and to his eyes unearned, celebrity. I daresay that if your father had died a random and anonymous death, and you were unknown... he might not be pleasant toward you, but it would not be as it is now. I believe he feels that James Potter was posthumously lionized in a way that obscured his true nature, and especially since you look so much like James and have many of his abilities, it is easy for him to transfer those feelings to you. You give him, in essence, a second chance to get even with James Potter somehow."

Harry was still not sure he understood how this could drive Snape's behavior, but it did make sense in some ways. But something Dumbledore had said is passing bothered him more. "Do you think that being a bully was my father's true nature?"

"No, of course not," Dumbledore assured him. "He could be arrogant, even bullying, to his enemies, but there was nothing he would not have done for his friends. Look at what he and his friends did for Remus. It is the sort of thing that you, Ron, or Hermione would do for each other. As Sirius told you, he grew out of the sort of behavior that you saw in the Pensieve. The person he became is the important thing, and he became a good, brave, and honorable person. You have nothing to be ashamed of, though in a way it speaks well of you that you are."

"I know I'm not like he was in that way. I don't go out of my way to look for opportunities to harass Malfoy, for example. If he leaves me alone, I leave him alone. Does Professor Snape really not see that? Is it so important to him to see me as my father that he can ignore reality?"

"Again, Harry, I cannot say, but I do know that it is in the nature of many people to ignore a reality that does not suit them. You need look no further than Cornelius Fudge's behavior over much of the past year. Deep down he knew perfectly well that Voldemort was back, but he seized on the fact that he had not seen Voldemort with his own eyes as an excuse to avoid dealing with what he did not wish to. It happens all the time, and none of us is immune to the temptation. One of the great personal challenges we all face is facing up to unpleasant realities."

Harry pondered this. Resignedly, he said, "I guess I shouldn't complain. I got a lot of good things from my parents. If I picked up an enemy from them, well, that's life, I guess."

"I would not describe Professor Snape as an enemy. Perhaps you are that to him, in his mind, but he need not be that to you. Assigning him that role only solidifies it in the reality that he is attempting to create. I would describe him as a person who is trying to do what he feels is right—he is, as you know, a member of the Order of the Phoenix—but is very wounded in some ways. He is trying to cope with those wounds, but does not prioritize the ones associated with your father. Instead, he is venting the pain from those wounds onto you.

"Let me give you some advice. You may take it or leave it as you choose, but for your own sake I hope you will take it. I encourage you to make this a project, one for your emotional health and development. Forgive Professor Snape. When he treats you badly, do not respond in kind; remember that he is wounded, and have as much compassion for him as you can summon. Try to let his hostility roll off you; use the Occlumency training from this summer to aid you in clearing your mind. Do not respond to his challenges or provocations. Do not judge the success of your endeavors by changes in his behavior; what you are doing, you will do for yourself, not for him. The better you can manage it, the more you will benefit. This may not seem obvious, but I assure you, it is true. It will require a good heart, which I know you have. It will also require emotional control and patience, which you can learn, and are vitally important to success later in life. I have done my best to embody these traits, and any success or regard I have gained is largely due to what mastery I have achieved in this area. In addition, practice in this area will help you keep emotional control in other instances, for example, any future confrontations with Voldemort."

Harry was having a hard time digesting this. Forgive Snape, even after Dumbledore knew how Snape had used Harry for a mental punching bag over the past year? After how terribly Snape had treated him? It didn't seem possible. But then, Harry thought, this is Dumbledore. I admire him for his power, but even more for his manner, his tranquility, that things never get to him. Is this how? Is it because he's

mastered what he's saying I should work on? This, and Dumbledore's last sentence, made Harry think of a question.

"Professor, in June, I was amazed that you kept so calm when you confronted Voldemort. You didn't seem nervous or angry. I've seen you angry, but you weren't then. Is this a part of what you're talking about?"

"It is related, yes. It is important to maintain emotional control in dealing with anyone, but Voldemort in particular. He feeds off anger. It strengthens him and undermines you. You could give him no better gift than to deal with him in anger. Emotional control gives you the power to deprive him of a weapon he can use against you."

The door to Dumbledore's quarters opened, and three house-elves walked in, carrying trays, plates, silverware, and glasses. They set Dumbledore's table and placed the food and drink on it. Dumbledore thanked them; they bowed, and departed.

"Well, it appears that it is time to eat, Harry." He gestured Harry to follow him, and they sat at the table.

Harry did not take particular notice of the food; he was still preoccupied by what Dumbledore was asking of him. "I don't know, Professor. What you're asking... it seems like more than I can do."

"Many things will seem like more than you can do, until you do them. Snatching an egg out from under a dragon would have seemed like more than you could do, until you put all your energy and will into finding a way to do it. This will take time and effort. It will not happen at once. There will be setbacks, occasions when you will fail. But every step forward you make will strengthen you, and help you succeed more in the future. It could even save your life."

Harry felt that Dumbledore was asking too much of him. He looked down, at his food, but didn't register it. "How can I just change how I feel about something, especially this? I mean, I don't know how I would even begin to do it."

Dumbledore nodded understandingly. "The first step is to change how you react, if not how you feel. When you react, try to observe your reactions, as if you were standing outside yourself. Use the same calming and focusing techniques that you have learned in the Occlumency classes; focus at first on controlling your actions. If you always act based on your emotions, others can manipulate you easily, as did Mr. Malfoy on the Quidditch pitch last year. You must choose your actions, not have others choose them for you. It may feel as though you have no choice but to respond a certain way to a provocation, but we can all choose our actions. Like the dragon egg, it is simply a matter of wanting it badly enough, of being determined to do what it takes. You can do it, I assure you."

Harry had been wavering between the ideas of telling Dumbledore he couldn't do it and telling him that he'd think about it, but something Dumbledore had said sent a chill down his spine. When Dumbledore said that Malfoy had manipulated Harry on the Quidditch pitch, it dawned on him that that was exactly what Voldemort had done in drawing him to the Department of Mysteries. He had counted on Harry to react with his emotions. But I had to go, he told himself, I thought Sirius was being tortured. No, responded another part of his brain, you had to do something, but you didn't have to go running off without thinking. This is what Dumbledore is talking about. You were terrified for Sirius, but you'd have helped him more by stopping and thinking, even if Voldemort had actually had him. If you'd done what Dumbledore is suggesting you do, Sirius would still be alive.

He winced internally, even though he'd already blamed himself dozens of times in his own head for Sirius's death. He also suddenly realized that it might not be a coincidence that what Dumbledore was suggesting would have had that effect. He's not asking me to do this for Snape's sake, Harry thought. He's trying to get me to control my emotions in general, and doing it with Snape is just for practice. And isn't this what I said I wanted to do, when I talked to Hermione in the library that day? To not have her get killed because I lost my temper and didn't think straight? Here's my chance, he's telling me how to do what I said I wanted to do. But does it have to be Snape? He sighed. If Dumbledore thinks I can do it, then maybe I can. At least, I should try. He looked at Dumbledore and gave a small nod. "I'll try."

"I am glad to hear it. Glad for your sake. It will help you a great deal, and I will do what I can to help you along. Now, let's tuck in, before the food gets cold."

They ate, chatting as they did so, about more mundane matters. After they finished, Dumbledore gestured him back to the chairs they'd sat on before. As they sat down, a thought suddenly occurred to Harry, something he'd wanted to ask someone about over the summer. He had no reason to think Dumbledore knew the answer, except that Dumbledore seemed to know everything.

"Professor, in June, in the Department of Mysteries... when we were trying to find Sirius, we came across that room, the one where you found us. There was that thing that looked like an archway, the one that Sirius fell through. What is that? What does it do?"

Dumbledore paused before answering. "No one knows, exactly," With a small grin, he added, "That is why it is in the Department of Mysteries. In fact, it is the reason the Department of Mysteries is where it is, and the Ministry of Magic around that. They were all built around that structure."

"How old is it? Who built it?"

"Ah, those are true mysteries indeed. No one knows the answer to either question; it has been there for as long as recorded history extends, and its creators are unknown. As to your first questions... before I answer, let me ask you, why do you ask about this?"

Harry recalled how entranced he was by the archway and the black veil, fluttering when it had no reason to. "I heard voices coming from it... voices I could barely hear, but I was sure they were voices. I felt drawn to it, like I wanted to go through it. Hermione grabbed me and kind of snapped me out of it, and we left the room. But I know it was powerful, something about it. I mean, I was convinced that Sirius was being tortured, and I let myself get distracted? That's why I'd really like to know." Dumbledore nodded sympathetically. "I understand, Harry. Let me ask you another question... Did anyone other than you react in this way? Did anyone else hear voices?" "Yes, Luna said she did, too. Neville looked kind of entranced, but I don't know if he heard voices."

"And, Harry, can you think of anything that you, Luna, and Neville have in common that the others do not?"

Nothing came to Harry for a moment. Then, after a minute, a light dawned, and his eyes widened. "We can all see thestrals..."

"Yes, Harry, you have all seen death with your own eyes. But in the case of the veil, it is not necessary to have seen death personally, just to have lost a very dear loved one. What is known about the archway is that it calls to such people. It gives them the feeling that it is imperative that they pass through the veil. Countless people have followed its call over the centuries."

"If you pass through it, do you... die?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"All we can say for sure is that those who pass through it are never heard from again. Whether they are dead... that we cannot know, unless we strictly define death as once having been present on the planet, and now no longer being so. Those who pass through it may be physically alive in some other dimension or type of reality, for all we know. Or, they could be dead. There are many theories, but no one can say."

Harry thought of a question that Dumbledore would be able to answer. "What do you believe, Professor?"

Dumbledore leaned forward a little. "One school of thought, Harry, believes that the spirits of those who die go there, as a way-station on part of a greater journey. It could be considered a kind of resting area. It is believed that those drawn to it are able to sense their loved ones' presence behind the veil, and the more the person was loved, the stronger the pull toward the veil. You lost your parents. Luna lost her mother. You both felt a strong pull; I believe that is the reason. Anecdotal evidence

suggests that some people have had contact with the area through dreams, or spiritual endeavors. This school of thought fairly closely mirrors my beliefs. Again, though, nothing is known for certain."

"I see." Harry was inclined to adopt for himself Dumbledore's opinions if he had none of his own as yet. He also found it comforting to believe that Sirius was still around someplace, in some fashion, even if he was not accessible. "And the archway and the veil... they're just a physical path to this place, a connecting point between this world and that one?"

"Yes, exactly. But I cannot even take a reasonable guess at who built it, or why they did. The thing is shrouded in mystery. It is, in fact, often referred to as the Veil of Mystery. Or sometimes, the Veil of Life, or the Veil of Death... different names go in and out of fashion."

"It was rippling... even though no one was touching it, there was no wind, it was still rippling."

"Yes, that adds to its aura, both in the abstract, and when one sees it," Dumbledore said.

Harry was silent for a short time, thinking of Sirius. Dumbledore seemed to know it, and did not disturb Harry's thoughts. Harry soon brought up a new topic of conversation, and they talked for a while longer. At 10:30, Dumbledore suggested that they call it a night. "You will soon, as you know, have to be in the habit of getting up at 7:00 or earlier," he pointed out. "Best to get started tonight; you will want to be at full alertness Monday morning." Harry almost wished Dumbledore hadn't made that reference to Monday morning; he was enjoying the glow of spending the time with Dumbledore, and didn't want to think about worrisome things. But he knew that, of course, Dumbledore was right. He thanked Dumbledore for having him over, said good night, and left.

He walked along the hallways of Hogwarts, heading for Gryffindor Tower, his head buzzing with all that he'd discussed with Dumbledore. As he turned a corner, saw a black-robed figure approaching. He looked up to see a familiar face, in a familiar expression: Severus Snape, looking annoyed and disgusted. "Professor Potter," hissed Snape, in a tone that put quotation marks around the first word.

Harry was about to react angrily to this, but suddenly thought, this is what Dumbledore wants me to do, here's my first chance to do it. Control your emotions. Don't react the way Snape wants you to. He felt himself calm down somewhat. He looked at Snape and nodded politely. "Professor Snape," he replied. Making an effort to keep calm, he paused for a second, his eyes asking the question, 'Is there something you have to say?'

Snape stared for a second, then his expression changed into one of mild surprise mixed with the usual loathing. Taking his eyes off Harry and looking straight ahead, he continued walking without another word. Harry wondered what the look he saw meant; it was as though Harry's manner had surprised him. Well, he thought, if doing what Dumbledore said to do got me out of a confrontation with Snape, then it's benefited me already.

He walked into Gryffindor Tower, through the common room up to the sixth years' room. He changed into his nightclothes, and got into bed. It seemed as though a few dozen thoughts were competing for attention in his head. It was over an hour and a half later that he fell asleep.

Harry was in a room, a relatively bare room. As he looked down, he could tell he was sitting at a table. He was wearing long, black, flowing robes, and staring straight ahead. He heard a voice from the next room. "My Lord... may I enter?"

He noticed that his head was nodding. "You may."

Bellatrix Lestrange entered the room. She kneeled in front of him, kissed the hem of his robes, and stood up again, not sitting at the table. "My Lord... did he talk?"

He laughed lightly, casually. "Of course he talked, Bella... everyone talks; the question is, do they have anything worth saying, or hearing. In this case, I believe he did."

She looked at him hungrily. "If I could know, my Lord..."

He somehow knew that he was looking at her imperiously, with great disdain, even though he could not see his face. "You dare to ask me for favors... so soon after your failure?"

She looked abject. "Forgive me, my Lord. I am your most loyal-"

"Lord Voldemort rewards loyalty, but only when it is mixed with competence. What good is a loyal but incompetent servant? You have already had your punishment... or would you like a little more?"

She dropped to her knees. "I am yours to command, my Lord. I merely wanted to know so that I could more ably serve you-"

"Yes, yes, I see that you believe that," he said, sounding almost disappointed. "Now, let us review, to make sure you remember... exactly what was your failure at the Department of Mysteries?"

"I was ruled by my emotions, my Lord. I was not thinking tactically, about the success of the mission. I put my own pleasure ahead of your interests. I failed to secure the prophecy." The brisk way in which she said it made it sound like she had said it before, perhaps many times.

"Yes, very good, Bella. It is good that you remember. Malfoy at least kept his mind on what had to be done, though he too failed. He and the others will suffer for their mistakes as well, once they are liberated, which will be soon enough.

"As to the man... though you do not deserve the privilege, I will tell you. He also believes that the Legion is there for me to access, and he told me how he believes it can be done. It is roughly consistent with what the other two said, before I allowed them to die. I now believe it is within my grasp."

"But they will have it very well protected, my Lord. The Ministry... Dumbledore..."

He felt a sneer form on his face. "The Ministry are fools, and they would still be hounding Dumbledore instead of looking for me if not for your mistakes. As for Dumbledore, he will be handled. Snape will take care of that."

She looked as though she wanted to scoff, but dared not. She looked at him darkly and said, "My Lord, Dumbledore must have turned him. He has not shown any loyalty, he stays-"

He whipped out his wand and pointed it at her; her mouth was still moving, but no sound was coming out. She bowed her head in immediate repentance. "SILENCE!" he shouted. "It is not for you to make such decisions! I gave him the test, and he passed it. If he were disloyal, I would know. Now, is that clear?" He waved the wand; she could talk again.

Her head was still bowed, her eyes down. "Yes, my lord."

"Very well, Bella. You may leave." She kissed his robes again, and withdrew. He walked over to the window, and looked at the partly cloudy morning sky. "They will follow me," he said to himself. "They will follow me."

Harry woke with a start. He knew instantly what had happened. That was not a random dream; he knew it came from Voldemort's mind. The question was, was it deliberate, like Harry's dreams of the Department of Mysteries last year, or accidental, like when he saw the snake attack Mr. Weasley. He knew what he had to do. He looked at the clock; it was 7:30. Late enough, he decided. He quickly got into his robes and exited Gryffindor Tower.

He wondered whether Dumbledore would still be in his quarters or in his office, but he figured he should check the office first. When he reached the gargoyles, he quickly said 'lemon drop,' and was admitted. He heard voices coming from the inside of the office; Dumbledore must be talking with the past headmasters' portraits, he realized. He knocked on the door; the voices went silent. Dumbledore opened the door.

"Good morning, Harry! Do come in. I was just telling my predecessors..." He trailed off as he saw the expression on Harry's face. "What has happened?"

"I had a dream," he said, "one of the same kind as last year. The Voldemort kind."

Dumbledore pointed his wand at the office door, then again, and turned back to Harry. "Just a moment, Harry, if you would. I have just summoned Professors McGonagall and Snape. They should be here shortly."

Harry looked concerned. "Why are you sending for..." he wanted to say 'Snape,' but realized he shouldn't, so he trailed off instead. He assumed, though, that Dumbledore knew what he was about to say. Dumbledore looked at Harry seriously.

"Harry, I have told you more than once that I trust Severus Snape. I understand why you find that difficult to accept, but I ask you to do so, on my word. For security purposes, anything you can tell me, you can tell him."

"Sorry, Professor. I guess some things are hard to get used to. I'll try."

After Snape and McGonagall had arrived, Dumbledore said, "Harry was starting to tell me that he had a dream. It was the type of dream in which he sees from Voldemort's perspective. I stopped him, and sent for you. Harry, please continue."

"Excuse me, Headmaster," Snape interrupted, "but might it not be wiser to instruct Professor Potter not to tell anyone the dream, including us? We know that his reception of it must be deliberate. You wanted him to study Occlumency to prevent events such as these dreams. Their information may harm us more than help. It may be to lead us into a trap, as he was led into one."

Harry's first thought was that it was quite a coincidence that Voldemort had vouched for Snape's loyalty in the dream, and here was the real Snape, trying to prevent Harry from sharing the information. He could not know, of course. Could he?

"The danger is not in the information itself, Severus, but in how we use it or not." He turned to Harry. "Please proceed."

Harry related the dream, he was confident, virtually word for word; such dreams were always more vivid than normal dreams, and easier to remember. He tried not to look at Snape as he related the part about Voldemort being sure of his loyalty. He looked from one to the other; all had neutral expressions throughout, except that Harry thought he saw some eyebrows flicker when he mentioned the 'Legion.' He finished, and they exchanged concerned expressions.

"Harry, I must ask," said Dumbledore gently, "did you practice Occlumency before going to sleep last night?"

Harry looked down, having wondered whether this question would be asked. "No, it was the first time in a month that I haven't." Harry was spared making an effort to look earnest; he knew Dumbledore would know if he was lying, and so didn't have to worry about that. "I think it was all that stuff last night, the different surroundings... I just forgot."

Dumbledore said, "Understandable. You will, of course, take this as a sign of how important it is to remember to practice Occlumency every night before going to

sleep." Harry nodded. To everyone, Dumbledore said, "We now must consider the possibilities. For example, it seems highly likely that Voldemort sent him the dream on purpose, but it is not impossible that it was spontaneous and unknown to Voldemort."

"Headmaster, before you continue..." Harry knew what Snape was going to say, and he was right. "Should not Professor Potter be excused?"

"No, Severus. Harry's access to information will be widened considerably. Last year, I gave him too little information, and we lost a man. I will not make that mistake again. I have realized that denying Harry information will probably harm more than it will help. He is integral to this fight. You know the prophecy; you know what it may come down to. He is young, but not inexperienced. He must have more information."

"Headmaster, have you considered all elements of this? He is still immature, and highly impulsive, as we saw last year. He-"

"Yeah, I have the impulse to save a friend who I thought was being tortured," Harry snapped. "Are you saying that's a bad impulse?"

"You should have checked! This is exactly what I mean, Headmaster. Professor Potter," Snape said sternly to Harry, "I know he was close to you. But in a movement like this, none of us can afford to act based on whatever feelings we have without considering what it might mean to the strategic arc of what we are trying to accomplish. You ran off to the Ministry without the first thought about that." He glanced at Dumbledore. "I do not hope to dissuade the headmaster; when he makes a decision, he does not usually reverse it. But I am telling you, the time may come when you regret it. Would you walk into certain death if the headmaster asked you to?"

"Yes," said Harry firmly, staring at Snape.

"Would you silently assent if he asked Miss Granger or Mr. Weasley to do so?" Harry bit his lip and said nothing. He knew what the answer was, and from the look on Snape's face, he knew Snape knew. "Or," Snape continued, "would you plead with him not to do so? Ask him to send you instead, when your survival may be necessary for our larger aims? We cannot afford that, Professor. You need to understand that. I will have little tolerance for arguments against actions because they might cause harm to this person or that person."

Snape might have continued, but Harry cut him off. "So however many corpses it takes to beat Voldemort, it doesn't matter? Individual lives mean nothing?"

"I think," said McGonagall, "that Professor Snape meant that they do not mean nothing, but that they must be balanced against other considerations, sometimes in ways you would not easily understand."

Making his voice more polite now that he was talking to McGonagall, Harry said, "I think I would understand if it was explained to me, at least. I've been through a lot."

"Yes, you have, and that is one of the reasons you will be getting more information," said Dumbledore, taking back the reins of the conversation. "But Professors Snape and McGonagall make a valid point; there are times when hard choices have to be made, and made with an emphasis on strategic ramifications. That is not easy for anyone to get used to, nor should it be. However," he said, now addressing Snape and McGonagall, "Harry will not be in a decision-making role, so I refuse to condemn his unwillingness to send a friend to their death. But he has a role, and he will do better with more information. He will do his best, as we all do. He is deeply involved, not of his own choice. He is Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived. He cannot help but be at the crux of events. You must know that, Severus."

Snape looked a little startled to be suddenly addressed by name. "You are no doubt correct, Headmaster," Snape said, his tone leaving no doubt about how he felt about that fact. "I am simply concerned that he could inadvertently harm the movement." "I think, Severus, that Harry will find it within himself to do what he knows he must. Now, let us return to the question of this vision of Harry's. Was it deliberate, or an accident? Opinions?"

"It must be deliberate," Snape offered, still casting unpleasant glances at Harry, as if it was going to take some time for him to be used to Harry's presence. "I believe that it is highly unlikely that the Dark Lord would be so careless as to accidentally allow this to be seen."

"But then the part that involves you doesn't make any sense," Harry pointed out. He was a bit hesitant to speak up in this company, but Dumbledore had as much as told him he should, and so he did. "Why should he want us to think that you're loyal to him? How does that help him? In that case, if you are loyal to him, and this vision is deliberate, then he's just exposed you, which is no good for him. So it would only make sense for him to do this if he suspected your loyalty. But if he suspected your loyalty..."

"I would be dead," Snape confirmed.

"Not bad, Professor Potter," said McGonagall approvingly. "You do catch on. But there can be wheels within wheels. It is possible that he considers Professor Snape a truly valuable operative, but is willing to sacrifice him to make us take more seriously what is contained in the other part of the vision. This business about the Legion."

"Yes, excuse me," Harry said embarrassedly, "but would you explain what this Legion is?"

"Certainly," said Dumbledore. "It is really no more than a legend. The name 'Legion of the Dead' refers to the notion that there are, in the spiritual realm, a number of souls, or spirits, who are mired in darkness and have not moved on to whatever is next. It is said to have been prophesied that these spirits, which are in a kind of

purgatory, would unite under a leader who was able to lead them out of their current state. Led back into the physical world, they would be put to evil uses by their liberator. They would not be physical as such, but could affect physical things. They would be, in a sense, like poltergeists. Any number of such beings could wreak great havoc. Voldemort either thinks he can retrieve and control them, or wants us to think he can." He paused. "Your thoughts, Severus?"

Snape considered. "It is not inconceivable that he would make such an attempt. His focus is on gathering forces at this time. But I still feel that this is almost certainly not genuine. I believe that the references to the Legion are little more than a distraction, and the discussion about me intended to make you uncertain. He feels that you will not condemn me without proof, so my usefulness may continue, but he will want you to worry about those close to you having divided loyalties. He may try to discover from me whether your behavior has changed; for example, if you seemed to stop trusting me, he could have me give you counsel opposite to what he truly desired you to do."

"In which case," McGonagall continued, "the question is, should we pretend we never heard what Harry was sent? Or should we pretend to have believed it, and so have security at the site increased, and have Professor Snape tell Voldemort that we are distancing ourselves from him?"

Harry had a thought. "Won't he suspect us if we act like we believe him? I mean, he's already deceived me once with false visions. Why should he think it would work again? Hmmm... But then again, why send the vision at all if he doesn't think we might believe it?" He looked pensive.

McGonagall regarded Harry sympathetically. "You can think yourself into knots with this sort of thing," she said. She turned to Dumbledore and said, "I have to agree with Professor Snape; it is difficult to see this as genuine."

Dumbledore said, "I would be inclined to agree, but there is another factor to consider. It was recently brought to my attention that there were a few scattered abductions worldwide involving Seers, especially ones renowned for the spiritual nature of their Sight. Six such Seers, from four continents, suddenly disappeared within a week of each other, over a month ago. Professor Trelawney came to me expressing concern that she might be targeted." Harry saw McGonagall roll her eyes. Dumbledore continued, "In any case, this information supports the thought that the vision is genuine. Or, he is putting considerable effort into making us think it is."

"I do not doubt that he would do such a thing," said Snape. "He might wish us to worry about his intentions even if his message was not delivered by Professor Potter. I believe we can conclude nothing from this information, one way or the other."

"Again, I agree," said McGonagall. "We should keep in mind that it is not impossible that it could be genuine, but we should take no action, act as if Professor Potter never relayed this to us."

"Very well, that is what we shall do, then," agreed Dumbledore. "I believe, then, that we are finished here for now."

Harry thought of a question. "Professor," he asked, looking at McGonagall, "you mentioned 'security at the site.' Which site did you mean?"

"I meant, the site where Voldemort would have to go if he were to try to summon the Legion of the Dead. The legend says that the only place from which the Legion can be summoned is the Veil of Mystery."

Harry went to the Great Hall to have breakfast, his mind reeling with all he had heard. There seemed to be five different ways of looking at it from each side. He was beginning to appreciate the value of the Occlumency lessons even more; who knew how many similar visions he had been spared? He knew he would not forget to practice Occlumency before bed again for a long time.

Eating and thinking, he suddenly realized that there had been no conversation regarding the part of his vision which predicted an escape for Lucius Malfoy and his fellow Death Eaters who were apprehended in the Department of Mysteries. Were they going to prepare for that?, Harry wondered. Would they put extra security around the prisoners, or not do so as part of pretending they'd never heard about Harry's vision?

Maybe Snape had been right, his uncertain side suggested. Maybe he didn't have enough experience to take part in those meetings. He had certainly felt in over his head. But then he remembered that Dumbledore didn't need him to make decisions, or even to necessarily offer input, but simply to be informed of what was going on. If that was all he need do, Harry realized, he could probably do it.

Harry spent the rest of the morning wandering around outdoors and preparing in more detail for the first week of lessons. He was still more worried about the disciplinary aspect of teaching than he was about the educational part of it. There was not much more he could do about that, however, than wait for the situation to occur.

The staff meeting started at 1:00, and lasted three hours. Harry had worried about it a bit, but need not have, as it hardly involved him at all. Harry only spoke for a short time; he gave the other teachers a brief sketch of how he was going to approach his classes. Professor Flitwick asked how he was going to handle detentions, given his schedule; Harry explained that Professor McGonagall had agreed to supervise any detentions he handed out.

Flitwick smiled. "That's very nice. Minerva, would you be a dear and supervise my detentions as well?" There was light laughter around the room.

"Certainly, if you wish to be a student and take the same course load as Professor Potter, I will be happy to supervise your detentions." There was more laughter.

"Alas, I'm not sure that would be worth it," said Flitwick.

"Speaking of detentions," said Snape, in a polite yet threatening manner, "if I hear, Professor Potter, that you are handing out unusually high numbers of detentions to students belonging to Slytherin House..."

Harry had already decided to push back if Snape pushed him. "...then it'll mean that Slytherins are deliberately testing my authority, and so I'll talk to you, and ask you to help bring them in line." Snape looked at Harry as if he couldn't quite believe what he'd heard; the other teachers exchanged glances and raised eyebrows. "I'll be sure," he continued, "to follow Professor McGonagall's example, and discipline students no matter which House they belong to."

Snape had not missed the implied insult. "Are you suggesting-"

"Would you like to see the statistics, Professor Snape?" McGonagall cut him off, irritated. "For five years running, you have the highest differential of all teachers between points awarded and taken from your own house versus other houses. As for detentions, only..." she riffled through a stack of parchment, then read one for a few seconds, "5% of the total time you handed out was to Slytherins, compared with 18% for Hufflepuffs, 21% for Ravenclaws, and 56% for Gryffindors".

"Students of my house know better than to misbehave around me," Snape said acidly. Harry couldn't help himself; he audibly scoffed.

Snape glared at Harry. "You have a comment, Professor Potter?" The sneer surrounding the word 'Professor' was extremely clear.

"Yes, I do." Harry glared back; this was something he'd wanted to say for a long time.

"Slytherins know better than to be disrespectful of you, I'm sure. But when their misbehavior is harassing other students, you manage not to notice. It's been like this in Potions for five years. A Slytherin, usually Malfoy, throws stuff at a Gryffindor. You never notice that, but if a Gryffindor retaliates, you notice immediately. If a Slytherin complains of being harassed, you take action; if a Gryffindor does you do nothing. Last year, a Slytherin hexed a Gryffindor from behind in the library, over a dozen witnesses saw it, and you did nothing. I could go on."

"I'm sure the staff weeps bitter tears at the cruel mistreatment your house has suffered," said Snape, bathing every word in unnecessary layers of sarcasm.

"I'm not asking them to, and you know it," said Harry, now on a roll. He thought about stopping to measure his next words, but instead, propelled by emotion, plunged forward. "I'm just making a point. I know what you do is deliberate. Slytherins are

chosen for their ambition, as the Sorting Hat says every year. You're teaching them that if they keep on good terms with friends in high places, they can get away with more than others can, which I suppose is how it is in real life. What I'm saying is, you have a lot of nerve warning me not to do something you do yourself. I know you're just trying to put me on the defensive, to make me not want to give Slytherins detentions, even if they deserve it. Well, it won't work." Harry continued to glare at Snape defiantly.

"Well, let us move on from this topic," said Dumbledore, who had said nothing for the past several minutes, staying out of the dispute. "Professor Potter has already been advised regarding handing out detentions; I will let him know if he missteps.

Professor Snape, I would like to see those statistics change for the better next year. Now, what is next?"

Harry had little to say for the rest of the meeting. Snape continued to shoot him poisonous glares, which he met with eye contact every time. He remembered what Dumbledore had said the night before, but he felt that the situation was different. He knew he had reacted emotionally, but he hadn't lost his temper, and felt he had made a good point. Even if I can manage to overlook all he's done to me in the past, I'm not going to let him push me around, Harry thought.

The feast/social event for the teachers that evening was more enjoyable than Harry had thought it would be, largely because Snape was away "on an urgent matter," the teachers were told. Their lack of a negative reaction suggested to Harry that Snape was no more popular in the staff room than he was among non-Slytherin students. Either that, or they were used to his being unsociable.

Harry sat between Professor Dumbledore and Professor Smith, who he had seen numerous times around the school but had never formally met. Professor Smith taught Muggle Studies, and was very popular with the female students; he was tall, movie-star handsome, and was friendly and affable. He asked Harry about his Muggle experiences, and shook his head sadly at Harry's answers. "There'd be a lot more people who thought the way your aunt and uncle do, I'm afraid to say, if they knew about wizards. Another good reason not to make the presence of wizards known."

Intrigued by Smith's avoidance of the phrase 'our presence,' Harry asked, "Are you Muggle-born?"

Smith smiled. "Not only Muggle-born, but non-magical. I married a witch in my early twenties, which was when I found out about magic. I learned all I could about the wizarding world, it was fascinating. I met Professor Dumbledore about ten years ago and had an excellent chat with him, and when the Muggle Studies position opened

up six years ago, he thought of me. I understand I'm the first Muggle to teach at Hogwarts for well over a century."

"I guess I never thought of taking your class," Harry admitted, "because I grew up with Muggles, and not very nice ones at that. I guess Muggles were something I wanted to get away from."

"I can understand that," said Smith. "But I'm sure you know that most Muggles are nowhere near like your relatives."

"Funny, I was telling my cousin the same thing in reverse, after the first wizard he ever talked to was Malfoy."

Smith's face darkened. "Ah, yes. I heard about that. As well you should tell your cousin that. Malfoy and people like him are why my class is doing poorly."

"How do you mean, 'doing poorly?'" Harry wondered.

"I mean, enrollment is down," Smith said. "It's lower than any other elective class, even Arithmancy and Study of Ancient Runes, which are much harder. In my six years at Hogwarts, not a single Slytherin has ever taken my class."

"Isn't that just as well, since all the people who think Muggles are scum get put into Slytherin?"

"I can't believe every last one thinks that," Smith argued. "There must be some who are interested. They just fear they'll be ridiculed if they do. That's what people like Malfoy do."

Harry continued talking to him about Muggles for a while, and after dinner was finished, everyone got up and wandered around chatting, renewing ties to friends and colleagues they hadn't seen for a while. A bit like the Hogwarts Express for teachers, Harry thought. Harry did not have to try to circulate; every professor there approached him at some point to chat, and he found almost all, given that Snape was absent, to be quite friendly. The only exception was Trelawney, who treated him with a certain cool formality; Harry wondered if he'd snickered too loudly and too often in her class for her to like him. Professor Flitwick came by and cheerfully discussed Harry's O.W.L. result and test, with which he was very pleased. He, and later Professor Sprout, thanked Harry for standing up to Snape as he did. Most everyone wished him luck and offered support. Harry was amazed at how nice they were being to him; he had expected at least a few besides Snape to be resentful of a sixteen-year-old teacher. But it seemed this was not the case. Harry thought it was likely that this was a result of their confidence in Dumbledore, but then he remembered that Dumbledore had hired Quirrell and Lockhart, so some of it had to be regard for him personally.

Near the end of the evening, Dumbledore asked for everyone's attention. Harry could have sworn he heard the sound of a spoon striking a wine glass, but Dumbledore was holding neither. The group quieted down quickly.

"My friends, a word, if I may... it is so very good to see you all again. You look happy and well. I am very glad to see comfort and good cheer in this room again." Harry recognized the allusion to Dolores Umbridge's presence; there was a small cheer. "And as we do every year... or at least recently, it has been every year...we ask the newest member of the staff to make a small speech and a toast. Professor Potter, if you would step forward?"

There was applause from the teachers, as Harry stood rooted to the spot in surprise until McGonagall put her hand on his shoulder and guided him forward. He felt totally at a loss. A toast? He thought of his Occlumency training. Clear your mind, he thought. It seemed to work; he felt less nervous very quickly. As the applause died down, Harry stage-whispered to Dumbledore, loudly enough for all to hear, "You could have warned me." This was greeted by chuckling, and Dumbledore's reply of, "Oh, no, it must be spontaneous."

Harry looked out and saw nothing but friendly faces, and it warmed his heart. "I, uh... I was pretty nervous, you know, about teaching this year, and the meetings today, and... well, anything to do with this job, come to think of it..." Most teachers laughed. "But everyone in this room has been great. I really appreciate your support. Also," he continued, getting less nervous as he talked, "I want to thank Professor Dumbledore for his confidence in me." Dumbledore nodded in Harry's direction. "And for a toast..." He thought for a few seconds, then said, "Here's hoping for an uneventful year."

There was some laughter, and everyone held up their goblets-except Hagrid, who had to lower his-and repeated, "An uneventful year!"

As he drank, Harry thought, just once, just once would be nice.

Chapter 8

The Defense Against the Dark Arts Teacher

At 5:30 p.m. on Sunday, Harry was sitting in a comfortable chair in a room behind the teachers' table at the back of the Great Hall. Professor Dumbledore had asked Harry to meet him there before the feast. Having nothing to do, he decided to practice Occlumency. He closed his eyes, and felt his mind start to calm down. He wasn't sure how long he'd been at it when a voice said, "You do seem to be coming along with that."

"Thanks to you," said Harry. "Was there something you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Yes, it is about the feast and the order of events. As you recall, the Sorting is first, then I usually say a few words before we eat. All the teachers are seated at the staff table before the students come in. It has occurred to me that it may not be desirable to have you at the table at that time. Your presence would lead to much distraction; I would like everyone to be paying attention to the Sorting."

"Sure, no problem," Harry agreed. "I've been stared at enough for a lifetime as it is. So, how will we do it, then?"

"After the Sorting, I will say a few words, then tell them that I would like to introduce the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher to them. That is when you will walk up. I will not say your name until they can see you."

"You probably don't even need to," Harry pointed out. "Unfortunately, it seems I'm one of those people who needs no introduction." He chuckled wryly at his own joke.

"Yes, indeed," agreed Dumbledore. "It is just for form's sake, of course. I will then ask you to say a few words. You will say whatever you wish, then I will call for the feast to begin. Is that acceptable?"

"Of course, Professor. I don't mind saying something, but there will probably be disruptions from the Slytherins. If there are, I'd like to know how you'd like me to handle it."

"Why, in whatever way you choose," Dumbledore said, in a tone suggesting he was surprised that any other way could be contemplated. "I will send in the dog when I am ready to announce you. You may relax here until then."

Harry frowned, puzzled. "The dog? What dog?"

"Oh, you have never seen it... it is a little spell I invented a while back. It is simple, but amusing and useful. I summon a dog; it is gold and shines brightly when you first see it. It is something I send to people when I wish to summon them. When you see the dog, you follow it. As it gets closer to its destination, its brightness fades, and it fades away completely when you have reached the desired spot."

"That sounds neat, I'll be looking forward to seeing that."

"Very good. Oh, and Harry, I wonder if you would oblige me by remaining at the teachers' table for the duration of the meal. I know that you would prefer to eat with your friends, but I would like your status as a teacher to be emphasized at this time."

"Yes, I understand, that makes sense," Harry agreed.

"Good, I will see you in a while, then." Dumbledore departed.

Harry sank down into the chair, seeing how comfortable he could get. Speaking in front of hundreds of students who would be shocked to see him... what was he going to say? He spent the next thirty minutes thinking of what he would say, trying

different ideas, imagining how the Slytherins might react. Finally, he decided that he was thinking too much, and it was time to clear his mind again. He was having some success beating down his nerves when he was distracted by something bright in the room. He looked over and saw a bright golden dog, a little over a foot tall. It was very friendly; it jumped onto Harry's lap and nuzzled him in the chest before jumping off and looking back at him, indicating that he should follow. Harry was surprised that the dog was substantial; he had expected it to be only an image. He got up and followed it.

He was behind the teachers' table and still out of sight when he heard Dumbledore saying, "And now, I have the pleasure of presenting our new Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor..."

Here goes nothing, Harry thought. He stepped up to the teachers' table, next to Dumbledore, who finished his sentence with, "... Professor Harry Potter!"

Harry took the podium. For the first second or two, the teachers applauded, but from the audience there was silence. Then a few Gryffindors started cheering; Harry could see Ginny, Ron, Hermione and Neville. Then there was a loud "WHAT??" from the Slytherin table, and naturally, it had come from Draco Malfoy. That prompted a low rumble of laughter, a kind of releasing of tension. Harry laughed as well, but it was partly at the look on Malfoy's face. Malfoy obviously couldn't believe it. Harry said, "Actually, I don't blame you; when Professor Dumbledore asked me to accept this position, I, you know, had to ask him to repeat it three times to make sure I understood him right." This got a moderate laugh. Harry started feeling more confident. These are just my fellow students, he told himself. I can do this.

"Most of you know that I led a group last year that was trying to practice Defense Against the Dark Arts, since it wasn't being taught to us. It was a great group and a great experience." He saw the two Hufflepuff prefects, Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott, look at him and nod. He nodded back. "I assume that gave Professor Dumbledore the idea to have me teach this class."

Harry took a slight pause and was going to continue when Malfoy spoke up again. It wasn't clear to Harry if Malfoy was talking to himself, another Slytherin, or Harry himself, but he heard Malfoy loudly say, "No way! If he's teaching here, then I'm leaving!" There was a dead silence following that.

I can't let that go unanswered, Harry thought. A comeback thankfully popped into his head, and after the silence had stretched to five seconds, Harry looked at Malfoy and said, "You know, Malfoy, that's a good plan. I totally support it." That got a fair bit of laughter. Harry continued, "In fact, I think you'll find there's a lot of support for that plan of yours." This got an even bigger laugh, and a cheer started and grew quickly. The cheer was clearly being made by those who agreed with Harry, and it

grew to include a substantial majority of Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor houses. Only the Slytherin table was silent. Malfoy looked as furious as Harry had ever seen him, and that was saying something.

Harry put up his hands to suggest that the cheers should cease; they did after a few more seconds. "As I was saying," he continued, and even that got a small laugh, "I don't claim to have big qualifications. What I learned from the group last year was that if you really want to improve, and you really try hard, you can."

He was interrupted by a Slytherin seventh year who shouted, "Even Longbottom?" This got a laugh from some of the Slytherin table. Harry saw Neville embarrassed and angry.

Harry laughed derisively. "Especially Neville! I don't think he got an Outstanding Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L. by accident. Maybe you want to give it a try, knowing what you're talking about before you open your mouth." There was more laughter and applause. A look at the Gryffindor table showed Ron, Hermione, and Ginny howling with laughter, and a still-embarrassed Neville looking very pleased.

"Now, please, let me wrap this up, I know you all want to get to your food, and I do, too," Harry said. He felt he had done well with the Slytherins who had heckled him, but didn't want to push his luck. "I was saying, anyone can improve, I'm sure of that. I see my job just as helping people do that. So, your attitude in classes will be very important. Also, just so everyone knows, I'll be teaching only the first through fifth years. Since I'm only a sixth year myself, it would be hard for me to teach the N.E.W.T. class." Harry glanced over at Dumbledore with a 'can I tell them?' expression. Dumbledore nodded.

"Teaching the N.E.W.T. classes... and this is so cool... will be Professor Dumbledore himself." It did not take long for a new round of applause to develop, this one led by the sixth and seventh years of Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor, and soon grew to include most of those houses, as well as half of Slytherin. Harry joined in the applause, looking at Dumbledore, and said, "It looks like I speak for most all of the sixth and seventh years when I say thank you, Professor, for doing this." Dumbledore inclined his head, to Harry and then to the students. Turning back to the students, Harry said, "Thanks for your support, and I'll be seeing most of you in class." He stepped away from the podium to widespread applause from all tables except, of course, Slytherin. Relief swept over him; he had done far better than he had expected. He wondered whether it was because he had spent the time before coming out trying to calm his mind rather than being nervous, as he knew he would have without Dumbledore's guidance.

He looked at Dumbledore again; he was not sure where he was supposed to sit.

Dumbledore gestured him to a spot between himself and McGonagall, who got up as

Harry was sitting down. Harry was surprised; he thought Dumbledore had planned to take back the podium after he was done.

McGonagall surveyed the students with one of her more severe expressions. "I had not planned to speak, but there is something I must make clear. Today is the first time in many years there have been disrespectful outbursts from the students during a welcoming speech." She cast particularly stern glances at Malfoy and the other Slytherin offender. "On this occasion, I will impose no punishment, as Professor Potter has already done so, in a fashion." She glanced at him as much of the crowd laughed for a second, then quickly stopped, as if fearing her disapproval. "But I must warn you, further expressions of disrespect will not be tolerated, no less with Professor Potter than with any other professor. He will be both taking classes and teaching them, but he has all the rights and privileges of a Hogwarts teacher, including the right to take points from offenders' houses and give detentions.

Professor Dumbledore and I have urged him not to be shy about using that power." That got scattered laughter across the three pro-Harry tables. "As Professor Potter is also a student, he will not have time to supervise detentions; I will be overseeing any detentions he hands out. And I assure you..." She paused, surveying all the house tables, lingering slightly on Slytherin, "...you want to avoid that. I believe there are plenty of unpleasant tasks that Mr. Filch needs done. Professor Dumbledore?"

"Thank you, Professor McGonagall," Dumbledore said, stepping back to the podium.

"And now the time has come to fill our stomachs. Bon appetit!" Food suddenly appeared on everyone's plates and tables. Conversation in the hall rose to an immediate high volume, despite the presence of the food, and Harry was sure he knew what most of them were talking about. I should be used to that by now, he thought. At least he seemed to have the support of a strong majority. It was, he felt, as much as he could have hoped for.

After taking a bite of her food, McGonagall leaned over to Harry and said, "You handled that very well, Professor."

After he finished the mouthful of food he was working on, Harry replied, "I would really rather have avoided it, though. I just didn't feel like I could ignore it."

"Most professors could have ignored it, Harry, but that was a luxury you did not have. Most professors already have their respect; no students question the right of any adult to be a professor. You, however, must earn their respect, and you went a long way toward doing so tonight. I am quite sure that it will not be long until no one is questioning whether you should have been made a professor."

"No one except the Slytherins, you mean," said Harry, frowning.

"I cannot imagine that that should matter to you in the slightest."

She had a good point. "Yes, that's true," he admitted. "I don't care what they think, really, it's just going to be a pain to have to keep them in line."

"If you give them detentions, Professor, I assure you it will be more painful for them than it will be for you," she said with a tiny smile. Harry grinned. It felt very good to have both her and Dumbledore on his side.

Starting about halfway through the meal, students started coming up to the teachers' table to talk to Harry. McGonagall, knowing this would happen, had told Harry that such visits should be kept to a couple of minutes or less, lest a crowd of students gather around the teachers' table. First to come were Ron and Hermione.

"Harry! You were terrific!" enthused Hermione.

"Malfoy looked like he was going to go up in smoke!" gloated Ron.

Harry grinned happily. He knew he would have their support, but that didn't make it any less appreciated. "Thanks," he said. "I was really nervous at first."

"You didn't show it," said Hermione. "And that was sweet, what you did for Neville. I don't know if he was more embarrassed by the Slytherin's insult, or your praise."

"Harry, guess what?" exclaimed Ron. "McGonagall sent me an owl yesterday to tell me, I've been made Quidditch captain!" His face was glowing with pleasure.

"Excellent! Well done!" said Harry happily.

Ron beamed. "I'm glad you're happy about it. Hermione told me you would be, but I was worried... after all, you've been on the team for five years..."

Harry shook his head. "That's not what should decide that. You'll be a better captain than I would have been. You know Quidditch backward and forward, you'll be great at coming up with moves and game plans. I'd have been terrible. We'll be keeping that Cup this year, I can feel it."

"I should hope so," said McGonagall, who had disengaged herself from her conversation with Professor Vector, who was on her other side. "Its presence in Gryffindor is a luxury that I have become used to. Now, you two, please move along back to your table. You will have plenty of time to talk to Professor Potter in the common room after the feast."

Ron and Hermione both smiled at her humorous intent in using his title, and nodded.

"See you later, Harry!" they said as they walked away.

A minute later, Ernie and Hannah came by. "Harry, that was great," said Ernie. "You really showed him who was boss."

"It'd be nice if he remembers, but I don't think he will... I wouldn't bet against a full-scale Slytherin revolt in my classes," said Harry.

"With Professor McGonagall there to supervise detentions? I don't think so. Of course, we'll be talking to our house later, about you and the D.A. You won't have any problems from Hufflepuffs, that's for sure."

"And I'm sure the Ravenclaws will be doing the same thing," added Hannah.

"And how about that, about Dumbledore!" said Ernie. "Can you believe it?"

"Incredible," said Hannah.

"Absolutely, we're just lucky to be N.E.W.T. students at this time. When I told Fred and George Weasley about this, they both wanted to come back." Hannah and Ernie laughed.

"Why, I do believe that my ears are burning," smiled Dumbledore, who had just ceased his conversation with Flitwick on his other side.

"I think Madam Pomfrey can help you with that, sir," said Hannah, with the smallest of smiles. Harry was surprised; he didn't know she had enough of a sense of humor to make a joke to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore laughed. "I daresay she could," he agreed. "I appreciate your enthusiasm, and I look forward to seeing you in class."

They thanked Dumbledore, said "See you later" to Harry, and went back to their table. Dumbledore said to Harry, "That didn't go so badly, did it?"

"No, it didn't," Harry agreed. "I mean, the Slytherins... that could have been a lot worse."

"I mean the others, Harry. Do not focus on what could have gone better, but focus on what you have, what you've achieved. You heard the support you have out there. And it is not because you are the Boy Who Lived; it is what you have done at this school. Always keep that in mind."

Harry would have, but the thought was knocked out of his mind by what he saw when he happened to glance up. Approaching them was Marietta Edgecombe; her friend Cho Chang was waiting for her about ten feet away.

She looked up at Harry and Dumbledore nervously. Harry couldn't avoid checking to make sure that all of Hermione's jinx was gone from her face; it seemed to be. She said, "I wanted to say, to, well, both of you that I'm sorry about what I did last year. I was scared about what might happen to my mum if I was found out. But I shouldn't have done it. I'm really sorry."

She seemed sincere enough to Harry, but something in him was unyielding in not wanting to accept her apology, though he knew he should. Dumbledore spared him further thought by saying, "Of course, Marietta. We understand that under stress we all sometimes make mistakes, and we know you would not be here if you were not sincere." He glanced at Harry meaningfully.

"Yes, absolutely," Harry agreed, more wanting to believe it than actually doing so. He found something he could say honestly. "I know it's hard to come over here like this." "I should never have joined the group in the first place," she said, sounding distraught. "I didn't want to, because of my mum, but Cho talked me into it. Still... I learned a lot, and you were a good teacher. I hope you do well with your classes." Harry was quite surprised. "Thanks... I appreciate it," was all he could think of to say. To Dumbledore, she said, "I'm really looking forward to your classes, Professor." Dumbledore politely inclined his head. Marietta rejoined Cho and they went back to their seats.

Harry turned to Dumbledore. "I know that you're going to say I should have forgiven her. Part of me knows I should, but part of me doesn't want to because it's still upset about what she did. She betrayed us all, and got you driven out of the school. How do we know that she isn't just apologizing because you and I are in favor at the Ministry again? How can she be trusted?"

"Trust must be earned, while forgiveness can be given. We need not trust her to forgive her. And yes, it is not impossible that her apology could be motivated as you say. My practice is to hope for the best, but know that the worst could happen as well. She might well have learned from her experience. She might truly be trustworthy, now or in the future. In the end, you must rely on your intuition, which is different from your emotions, which rule your reaction now. Your intuition is the best decision-maker you have, and I have known you to use it unerringly in situations where your emotions were not engaged."

That reminded Harry of another situation regarding judgment and trust. After checking to make sure that Snape was nowhere in hearing range, he asked.

"Professor... please don't take this as a criticism, I'm only asking because I'd like to know... when you asked Professor Snape to teach me Occlumency, were you listening to your intuition?"

Dumbledore smiled sadly. "My first wish would be to avoid the question entirely, to be honest. But, as with Umbridge, you suffered for my mistakes, and so you deserve an answer. No, I fear I did not listen to my intuition. I listened more to my heart. I wanted to believe that he could set aside a grudge in the service of an important task. As it was, he ended up yielding to the temptation to try to further both at the same time. I do not recall that my intuition strongly said otherwise, but I do not believe I tried so hard to access it. So, that was a case where I hoped for the best but it did not happen. When you listen to your heart, that can happen. But I still believe that it is better to be too hopeful than to be too pessimistic."

Harry thought about that. He found it hard to be hopeful in some cases, but he had to admit that he didn't have much experience with this sort of thing. He was still

inclined to trust Dumbledore, even though Dumbledore had admitted more than one mistake. Thinking about that gave Harry another thought.

"Professor, you've admitted mistakes to me three times in the past three months. I'm pretty sure that no one else has done that, once, in my entire life. I'm not sure I'd want to. How do you do it so easily?"

"By realizing that if you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself; if you do not admit mistakes to those who were affected by them, you end up not admitting them to yourself. Notice here again the concept of 'what we do to others, we do to ourselves.' If we do not admit our mistakes to ourselves, we cease to notice that we are making them. And if we cease to notice that we are making them, we can go terribly wrong, causing pain to ourselves and others. We must always be honest with ourselves, and part of that is being honest with those close to us. Admitting mistakes is a part of that as well."

Harry looked pensive, then said, "Professor, I want to thank you for doing that. I mean, I didn't really blame you specifically anyway, but it kind of makes me feel better that you did."

"I think it is because you know that if you did blame me, I would admit it, and then you would feel better. It also means I respect you enough to tell you. However you would like others to act towards you, act towards them."

"The Golden Rule," Harry mused.

"Yes, well..." Dumbledore humorously shrugged as if mildly embarrassed, "...not everything I say is original. It is still true, however."

For the next half hour, Harry switched between talking to Dumbledore and McGonagall. He enjoyed doing both; he found to his surprise that McGonagall was somewhat relaxed and friendly to him, especially compared to what he thought of as her normal character. It occurred to him for the first time that perhaps how she was acting with him now was in fact her normal character, and that how she came across to the students was not who she really was.

As he finished telling Harry a story concerning a welcoming feast almost fifty years ago, Dumbledore said, "I notice people finishing, so I will be saying a few more words. After I finish, you will be free to head back to Gryffindor Tower. Excuse me, please."

Dumbledore stood up and moved to the podium. "Excuse me for interrupting your conversations. I notice that it is getting late, and I do not want you heading off before I mention a few pieces of school business.

"I believe that all four Quidditch teams have openings this year; there will be tryouts within the first two weeks of classes. Your house bulletin boards or your house's prefects will have more information. Also, the first Hogsmeade weekend will

take place on the last weekend of October, so third years, get your permission slips to your Head of House.

"One final piece of business. Those of you who were here last year will recall that a number of 'Educational Decrees' were issued, which regulated various aspects of life at Hogwarts. I would like to make sure everyone knows that those decrees have been rescinded and are no longer in force." This was met with a resounding cheer.

"Thank you. Prefects, will you please show the first years back to their houses?"

He stepped down as Harry saw Ron and Hermione gather up the first years to take them back to Gryffindor. He was getting up to leave when he saw McGonagall approach him.

"Professor Potter, I'm glad I found you before you left. The students get these at breakfast, but I thought it would be better for you to have yours now." She handed him a schedule, and waited a moment to see if he had any questions.

Harry's first reaction was that it was a very neat, organized schedule. Then he realized why; unlike most days before when he had had different classes at different times every day, on this schedule, all classes started and ended at the same time.

The mornings were when he would teach; he would study in the afternoons.

The schedule called for him to teach two double classes each morning to a different year's students every day. He saw that his Monday schedule was: 8:00-9:50

Gryffindor/Slytherin year one, then 10:00-11:50 Hufflepuff/Ravenclaw year one. On

Tuesday it was the same thing except with second years, and so on until he was teaching fifth years on Friday. His afternoons were equally neatly done; he was

taking five classes, and every one of them was a once-a-week double class. All started at 2:00, with one each day: Potions with Snape on Monday, Transfigurations with McGonagall on Tuesday, Charms with Flitwick on Wednesday, Care of Magical Creatures with Hagrid on Thursday, and Defense Against the Dark Arts with Dumbledore on Friday. Harry noted with pleasure that Potions took place on Monday, where it would be gotten out of the way for the week, and Defense Against the Dark Arts would be on Friday, leaving him with a good feeling before the weekend. It looked like exactly the schedule he would have chosen if he could. He noted with further pleasure that he had no classes as a student with Slytherins; all of his classes were with Hufflepuffs or Ravenclaws. It seemed too good to be true; he looked up at McGonagall.

"Is something wrong with your schedule, Professor?" He thought she sounded amused, but he could never tell with her.

"It's perfect, which is why I'm surprised. How did it happen that all my classes line up at 2:00, one each day? That's an amazing coincidence," Harry pointed out.

Now he was sure she looked amused. "Well, I'm pleased that your native intelligence was sufficient to notice. It is not a coincidence at all, as you may have guessed. One of my responsibilities as Deputy Headmistress is supervising the assembling of the year's schedule. It is a difficult task, not to mention tedious. It was made much more difficult by the addition of a teacher who is also a student. I dealt with the situation by creating your schedule first; all others were created around that. So, there was no reason not to make yours, as you say, perfect. Your lessons will be finished by 4:00, so your evenings will be free for study and Quidditch, while my evenings will no doubt be laden with supervising dozens of your detentions." Harry looked up in surprise and smiled; he could not recall ever having heard her make a joke of any sort to him before. I bet she makes them more with Dumbledore or others, he thought. "Well, let's hope not," he said. "Let's see how it goes. As Professor Dumbledore says, let's hope for the best."

She raised her eyebrows a bit. "Well, good... I'm pleased to see that he's rubbing off on you," she said. "Good night, Professor Potter." She walked off towards the teachers' quarters.

Most of the students had filed out by now. Harry headed off to Gryffindor Tower, McGonagall's words echoing in his head. "He's rubbing off on you..." Harry realized what a great opportunity this year was; as a teacher, he would have more access to Dumbledore, and as a student, he would take a very important class from him.

Dumbledore was also giving Harry a lot of advice, and Harry knew he could profit by understanding Dumbledore better, understanding how he was the way he was. The conversation about admitting mistakes had been interesting; it seemed that Dumbledore gained strength by admitting weakness. Harry hoped he would understand these things at some point.

He turned a corner and saw the portrait of the Fat Lady. Harry realized with a start that he didn't know the password, and it looked as though everyone might already be inside. However, just at that moment, Ron climbed out of the portrait hole.

"Ah, there you are," said Ron. "I was wondering, you didn't come back..."

"McGonagall was giving me my schedule." He showed it to Ron.

"Wow, never seen one like this. As for your afternoons, I've got everything you've got, except Potions. Won't miss that. Hey, you've got no classes with Slytherins! As a student, that is. How'd that happen?"

"I forgot to ask her, but I'd bet it's deliberate. After the incident on my birthday, I think they're trying to keep me and Malfoy apart. A real tragedy, that."

"Be brave, I know you'll get through it somehow," Ron answered in the same vein.

"Maybe you'll run into him in the hallways, find any old reason, and bang, he's in with McGonagall."

Harry shook his head. "Sounds good, but... if I have to explain to McGonagall why I did it, I'm going to want to give her a better reason than "I didn't like the way he was looking at me."

Ron laughed. "Knowing Malfoy, just stand near him for ten seconds, he'll give you a really valid reason."

"That's true. Oh, by the way, what's the password?"

"Pepperoni pizza."

"You're kidding," said Harry.

"It's all food this year. Don't ask me why. Hermione's idea. I know better than to ask." Harry understood that Ron wanted to avoid getting bogged down in explanations he didn't care about.

"Hey, speaking of Hermione, how are you on this Astronomy thing?"

Ron glanced around to make sure no one was listening. "Just between you and me, I'm not big on it. I got my 'Acceptable' pass, that's good enough for me. I could do without this."

"But as far as Hermione's concerned?" Harry asked, glancing around to make sure she didn't suddenly appear.

"Let's go, full steam ahead, 100% behind her. I can't wait to raise my Acceptable to an Outstanding. She was so thrilled. 'That's the spirit, Ron!'"

"I can't believe she believed you, it's so unlike you. She must be really bent out of shape on this, to not see what you were doing. This is so important to her."

"Which is why I'm 100% behind her. So to speak. Yeah, you should have heard her on the train. As soon as Malfoy and Parkinson leave the compartment, she starts in on it. Ernie was totally with her; he got Exceeds Expectations too, and by the time they're done going on about it it's the crime of the century, with historic and worldwide moral implications, you get the idea. Like me, Hannah didn't care, but unlike me, she was free to say so. But I'm totally behind her, you understand."

"Of course," Harry agreed. "Just don't forget you are."

"Shall we?" Ron asked, pointing back to the portrait.

Harry nodded. "Pepperoni pizza!" The portrait swung aside, and Ron climbed in, followed by Harry. Harry was greeted by a loud burst of cheers, people clapping him on the back, and people talking to him.

"A teacher! In our common room!"

"How did it happen?"

"Looking forward to your class!"

"You really burned Malfoy!"

Harry shook hands with well-wishers and talked to a few people at a time; there didn't seem to be a single Gryffindor who did not wish Harry well. He noted

that those who approached him tended to be older students; he wondered if the younger ones were too intimidated to approach him. The famous Harry Potter, now a teacher, a larger-than-life figure. He chuckled to himself at the idea; he definitely never felt larger than life.

He was even approached by Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown, both of whom had been in the D.A. but had kept a certain distance from Harry in general; he wondered if it was because of his disdain for Professor Trelawney, whom they both revered. Both congratulated him on his new job, and thanked him for his help in the D.A. the previous year ("Our parents were shocked that Padma and I both got Outstandings; now they're big fans of yours!"). He awkwardly thanked them and changed the subject to the excitement of taking lessons from Dumbledore.

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of a whistle. Harry looked around and saw no one with a whistle, but Ginny was trying to get people's attention, so Harry assumed she must have done it with her wand. Maybe a spell she learned from her mother, Harry thought. It sounded like something Mrs. Weasley might do.

"Everyone... I just want to give us a chance, as a group, to congratulate Harry on being the youngest-ever teacher at Hogwarts. And you were the youngest-ever Quidditch player, too! They'll have to write new record books."

Flush with their approval, Harry felt like cutting up a bit. He affected the air of pompous politicians he'd seen on Muggle chat shows, and said, "Yes, thank you, Ginny. My next goal is, after Professor Dumbledore retires, to become the youngest-ever Hogwarts headmaster." To their widespread laughter, he added, "But first, I plan on becoming the youngest-ever teacher to give Malfoy over one hundred hours of detentions." This got even greater laughter and cheers, and shouts of encouragement.

Ginny continued, "And we all hope to see you accomplish that goal. One other thing I wanted to say is to thank you for standing up for Neville." Others voiced approval; Neville was smiling but still looked embarrassed. "And," Ginny went on, "there's something you deserve, but I think Neville will be too shy to give you, so I will." She took a step forward, reached up, and kissed him on the cheek. This was met with cheers and laughter, the latter of which Harry assumed was inspired by his obvious embarrassment.

Seamus and Dean were teasing Neville, Dean saying "Go on, then, Neville, don't be shy! He stood up for you, after all!" Harry laughed; Ron was in hysterics.

Neville was laughing, too. He stepped forward, and said, "Well, no kissing, Harry, but I do want to thank you. You stood up for me, and got him good."

Harry shook his head, as if to say that it was nothing he needed to be thanked for. "Well, I wouldn't have been able to say what I said if you hadn't done so well on your O.W.L."

Ginny's little ceremony was over; people were returning to their own conversations, so Harry headed over to Ron and Hermione near the fireplace. He sat down in a chair they had saved for him and exhaled. "Well, that was quite an experience."

"You mean Ginny kissing you?" Hermione teased.

Harry started to shoot her an annoyed look before he realized that she was teasing him. "No, the speech, of course. I'd never spoken to that many people before."

"I know. You were so embarrassed when she kissed you, it was really cute."

"Well, I just wasn't expecting it." He paused. "Better her than Neville, though."

"Well, that's quite a compliment," said Ginny, having just walked over. "I'll cherish that for the rest of my days... he'd rather be kissed by me than Neville..." She smiled wickedly.

He feigned annoyance. "Having quite a bit of humor at my expense tonight, aren't you?"

"Well, to be fair," she protested, "I didn't kiss you just to make fun of you. I really do think it was great of you to do that." She paused. "Your being embarrassed was just a side benefit."

"Glad I could be of help," Harry countered. "I guess it's good, though; you should have at me now and then, so I don't get too big a head from being a teacher."

"Oh, don't worry, Harry, we'll make sure that doesn't happen," said Hermione. "We're your friends. We wouldn't let you get away with it."

"No, I wouldn't think so," Harry agreed. "So, anything happen on the Hogwarts Express worth telling?"

"No, not really," said Ron. "Malfoy was his usual horrible self, kept making cracks about you, your Muggle family, you know the routine. About us, a bit, too, but mostly you. Must still be hurting from the disciplinary hearing. I wanted so badly to come back with stuff about Dudley. But I didn't, don't worry."

"Sorry... I just feel like my aunt does have at least some reason to be worried."

"No, no big deal. I really also found myself wanting to tell him about you being a teacher, but Hermione was right, it would've been bad. Anyway, finally he left. Things got a lot better after that. Later, after we joined Ginny and Neville in their compartment, he and his minions came by. 'Where's Potty? Off doing publicity photos?' He seemed to be really curious. Boy, did I want to tell him."

"Ron did pretty well, though," said Hermione. "He said, 'he's off at the Ministry, giving testimony against your father.' Malfoy looked really angry, and said, 'you wait, they'll be out of there soon enough.' Ron was really quick, he just said, 'Oh, thanks, Malfoy, I'll be sure to tell my Dad to have them increase security.' Malfoy got red again and stomped out."

"Well done, Ron," said Harry encouragingly. "You do that long enough, he might even start leaving us alone."

"That's a bit much to hope for," Ron pointed out. "Hey, how about you? How was your weekend up here?" Harry started telling the story; it took about half an hour to cover the highlights. They were most impressed by his dinner with Dumbledore.

"Wow..." Ron exclaimed. "A private dinner with Professor Dumbledore... that must've been so cool..."

"I was nervous, but not for long. You know, I'm sure, he has this way of making you not feel nervous. But, yeah, it was pretty great. He told me all kinds of stuff." He related some of it, including his answer about the Veil of Mystery. He suddenly remembered something. "Hey, Neville!" he said; Neville was reading a few yards away. He put down his book and walked over. "Yeah, Harry?"

"Remember that archway in the Department of Mysteries? The one you told us you had dreams about? When we were in that room first, what did you notice about it?"

"I wasn't sure-I was standing a ways away from it-but I thought I heard voices coming from it, as if there were people inside it. Why? Did you hear that too?"

Harry explained what Dumbledore had said about it. "So that's why Luna, you, and I heard stuff, but the others didn't. It's like with the thestrals."

Neville looked puzzled. "Yeah, but Harry, you said he said you had to have lost a loved one? I never have. The reason I see thestrals is because a friend of my gran's died while she was at our place, and I happened to be there. But I hardly knew her, and no one else I know has died."

Harry frowned. "That's really strange, but that is what he said. I'll try to ask him again if I think of it. Oh, Hermione, how's it going with the Astronomy test?"

She brightened. "I talked to Ernie on the train, and he completely agrees with me. He's going to start talking to Hufflepuffs, and try to find out if anyone failed and is interested in joining us. We don't want to make a big campaign of it because of possible backlash. But it's nice to find someone who agrees with me."

"We agree with you, Hermione," said Harry gamely. Hermione smiled, a bit sadly.

"You two... it's more right to say that you don't disagree with me. You really don't care one way or the other. It's like the reverse of Quidditch. I watch the matches, I want you to win, but I can't feel about it the way you do. You can't feel about this the way I do. I wish you could, but I understand. I can be happy with the fact that you'd like to care, like I'd like to care about Quidditch."

Harry and Ron looked a bit deflated, as though they'd been found out, but relieved that Hermione was being nice about it. "We do want to support you, Hermione," protested Harry. "If you ask us to do something, we'll do it."

"I know. And I do appreciate it, and I'll ask if I can think of something besides signing the petition. But sometimes... you need someone who feels the same way you do, it makes you feel like you're not alone. But you tried, and thanks for that."

They talked for a bit longer, then headed off to their respective rooms. Harry and Ron climbed the steps talking about Quidditch.

"...and the tryouts are Friday? Good, I'll be able to come. No detentions to do with Umbridge this year."

"You can't know, Harry, you've got Snape tomorrow, after all. You never know when he's going to get you for something."

"Oh, didn't I tell you? Dumbledore's decided that because I'm a teacher, I can't be given detentions when I'm a student."

Ron looked truly impressed by this. "So, you could do anything you wanted?"

Harry gave him a wan smile. "No, I couldn't. If I do something that merits detention, the consequences are worse. I have to look Dumbledore in the eye and tell him why I did what I did. You remember what it was like with him when we flew the car?"

Harry could tell by the expression on Ron's face that he recalled vividly how Dumbledore, instead of acting strict as most teachers would, gave off an air of saddened disappointment, leaving Harry and Ron feeling as though they'd let him down personally. "Yeah, I see what you mean," Ron said. "Oh, well, it was a nice thought."

They climbed into their beds. Harry's mind was churning with nervousness about the next day, and not only about the classes he would teach. Snape was the teacher listed on his schedule, so McGonagall had clearly somehow convinced him to accept Harry. But he knew that the lesson would be a trial. Lying in the bed, Harry decided to make Potions a test of his ability to do what Dumbledore had asked of him. He had already decided to work extra hard in Potions and keep up with the others, as Snape would be looking for excuses to criticize him, having no doubt resisted Harry's presence in the class. But now, Harry also planned to ignore every provocation, every insult, every sneer. Do what Dumbledore asked you to do, Harry

thought. If he thinks you can do it, you can do it. He said I won't succeed all the time, but I should try.

Not wanting to forget before he fell asleep, Harry concentrated on clearing his mind with the Occlumency exercises he learned from Dumbledore. It was not long before he was asleep.

Harry got up at 6:50, which was earlier than he strictly had to, but this was the first day, so he wanted extra time, as did the others in his dormitory; he was the last to get out of bed. He dressed quickly, put his Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers' book and his Potions text in his bag, and headed off to breakfast in the Great Hall. Ron and Hermione were already there and had saved a place for him, at the end of the hall closest to the teachers' table. They had sat there consistently for most of their time at Hogwarts so that if Malfoy wanted to come by and cause trouble, he would have to do so in the full view of teachers. Naturally, Malfoy only tended to come by when no teachers were around. Harry sat down.

"So, how are your schedules?" he asked.

"Not too bad, even Hermione's, even though she still has ten subjects," Ron answered, his tone suggesting that not all was well with Hermione. "Thank goodness in N.E.W.T. classes there's only two lessons a week, so even on Hermione's worst day, she only has five lessons, and I've got four on mine. But of course, you're supposed to study more outside, so it doesn't seem that much easier."

"Nor should it, Mr. Weasley." Professor McGonagall stopped as she headed to the teachers' table. "These two years will be the most demanding academically of your time at Hogwarts."

Ron sighed. "Yes, I know that, Professor. When I think about all that work, a joke shop starts to look pretty good."

McGonagall raised her eyebrows slightly. "Did your brothers tell you that I dropped in on their shop last week?" The surprised looks on their faces told McGonagall that they had not known. "They seem to be doing quite well. I told them that I was there doing reconnaissance; I want to know what sorts of things I'll be confiscating this year. The fact is, I also wanted to express my appreciation for their actions last year. The students were not the only ones whose spirits they lifted."

Harry, Ron and Hermione all looked even more surprised now; this was McGonagall letting her hair down, compared to her usual manner. Harry said, "Yes, I was telling them at the shop that they should have gotten a Special Award for Services to the School."

"Well, Professor, if you were serious, you could attempt to see that they get it."

Harry's eyes widened. "Is that something I can do?"

"You can put them up for one," she explained. "If a teacher thinks a student deserves such an award, the teacher can suggest it to the headmaster, who will consult other teachers for advice, and then decide. None have been given out for last year."

"Wouldn't it be too late?" Hermione asked.

"The deadline is six months after the 'services' have been performed, so there would still be time."

"Well, then I am going to talk to Professor Dumbledore about that, because I really do think they deserve it," said Harry. "They could put the plaque up on the wall near that swamp they made, that would be fitting."

"You are quite fond of the twins, Professor," she observed.

Harry nodded. "They've been really good to me."

Ron scoffed. "I'd say it's more like you've been really good to them."

McGonagall gave Harry a quizzical look. "Ron's referring to how they got the gold to open their shop," Harry explained. "It was from me; I gave them my Triwizard winnings." Ron and Hermione chuckled at the look of incredulity on McGonagall's face; it wasn't something they saw often.

"I just didn't want to keep it," Harry answered her unasked question. "It should have been Cedric's. I tried to give it to his parents, but they wouldn't take it. Seeing the shop, I know I did the right thing."

"You felt the money was... tainted somehow? Because of Cedric's death?"

"Maybe partly that, and partly that I was helped to get that far; Barty Crouch was trying to steer me through it. Dobby got me gillyweed after he heard what he thought was Professor Moody talking about it to you in the staff room; I would've failed the task otherwise. I didn't deserve to win, I didn't deserve the money."

McGonagall looked concerned, and sat down next to Harry at the Gryffindor table. "Is that really what you think, Harry?" He nodded. She assumed a stern expression. "Listen to me. Do you think the other students had no one helping them? Their headmasters did all they could for them, I'm certain of it. Professor Sprout may have helped Cedric, for all I know. Only a great deal of self-control prevented me from helping you. You were three years underage, thrown into the contest against your will... if anyone deserved extra help, it was you. What matters, in any case, is not how you got the tools to do what you did, the important thing is what you did. You flew brilliantly against a very dangerous dragon. In the second task, you found the captives first, and were willing to sacrifice your score to make sure no one was

harmful. In the maze, Barty Crouch did remove some of your obstacles, but I am certain you could have found your way past them. You saved Cedric from the giant spider, when you could have let him be attacked and taken the prize. You deserved the prize, because you competed well, and you showed character and humanity. Now, you two," she concluded, looking at Ron and Hermione, "you will remind him of this from time to time, I hope?" She got up, walked over to the teachers' table, and struck up a conversation with Professor Smith. Ron and Hermione looked stunned, as did Harry.

"Well, she sure told you, mate," said Ron with an impressed look.

"She's right, of course, Harry," said Hermione earnestly. Harry wasn't sure what to think. He wanted to believe McGonagall, but he had told himself that he didn't deserve it for so long, it was hard to let go of that opinion so suddenly.

A flood of owls came pouring into the room, as happened every day, but especially the first day of the term, as parents sent things the students forgot. Harry involuntarily looked down the table at Neville, but it seemed that he had forgotten nothing this year. A good sign, Harry thought.

Hermione got up and walked over to near the Hufflepuff table, where Ernie Macmillan had been waving at her. Harry looked at Ron, "Astronomy?"

"Must be," Ron agreed. "They'll be comparing notes on who's willing to join them, and how to get the Ravenclaws involved."

"Ravenclaws can't get involved," Harry pointed out. "They weren't there. It was just us and the Hufflepuffs."

"Oh, I'd forgotten that," Ron said. "Well, then it might be easier to get people to go along, right?"

"Seems so," Harry agreed. "Ernie'll be working on the Hufflepuffs, and Hermione on the Gryffindors. But I'm not sure how much influence she'll have. She doesn't get along that well with Parvati and Lavender. Neville will be in, I assume, but she doesn't know Dean or Seamus that well, either. Maybe we should talk to them."

"Good idea," agreed Ron. "After all, I'm a prefect, and you're... well, you're Harry Potter. Maybe we can get them to help."

Hermione came back to the table. "Ernie says three of the Hufflepuffs failed, so they'll be with us. He's going to work on the other ones."

"Too bad more of us couldn't have failed. At least you did your part, Harry," said Ron solemnly.

"They didn't follow my shining example," agreed Harry. "Am I the only Gryffindor that failed, Hermione?"

"No, Neville did, too. Five out of eighteen failed, which is a much higher percentage than usual. That should help, too. It's also unusual for no one to get an

Outstanding. My next thing to do is to ask Professor McGonagall if I can find statistics on the average scores for the Astronomy O.W.L. test. If ours are substantially lower than usual, that helps my petition."

"Well, good luck. Wow, look at the time, it's already ten to eight. I should get going. Want to be ready when the students get there." He got up; Ron and Hermione did too.

"You'll do great," said Ron.

Hermione walked up to face Harry, and smiled mischievously. "So, will you get embarrassed if I give you a kiss for luck?"

Harry smiled back. "Probably. But go ahead, anyway." She did, then she and Ron walked away, giving Harry last words of encouragement. He picked up his bag and headed to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.

He walked in through the office door; each classroom had an office for the teacher attached to it. As he sat down at the desk, the thought crossed his mind that this was where Umbridge had sat last year. It gave him motivation; he felt part of the reason he was in the chair now was to keep others like Umbridge out.

Harry did not have a specific lesson plan for this lesson. The day's students would all be first years, some of them knowing almost nothing about the magical world, so he would have to go a little slowly. He knew how it had been for him in his first year, and he wasn't going to forget that now. He wanted to be sure that no one was left behind, not understanding what he was talking about. He also reminded himself of his intention to treat the class somewhat like it was a big D.A. He didn't think of himself as a teacher so much as an older student, who should give advice and help to younger students as needed. He felt nervous, but thinking of it as the D.A. helped ease his anxiety.

Just then, the bell rang, signaling the start of class. Harry walked out of the office into the classroom. He was greeted by twenty faces, faces that looked impossibly young. He looked at the roll sheet, which was already at the podium he stood at. He looked up again, and saw expectant faces-some nervous, some gawking, some eager, but none disinterested.

"Well, this is your first class, so let me welcome you all to Hogwarts. I hope you enjoyed the feast last night, and weren't too scared at the Sorting." A few students chuckled, obviously the ones who had been scared. "I was, when I was Sorted. I thought I was going to have to do something. If I'd known it was just putting on a hat, I wouldn't have worried at all." There were a few more chuckles. A boy raised his hand. "Yes?" Harry asked. "What's your name?"

"David Finch-Fletchley, sir."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Justin's brother?"

"Yes, sir." David looked nervous but intent. "Can I ask, did the Hat talk to you? If it did, what did it say?"

Interesting, Harry thought. No one's ever asked me that question before, and it's the first question I'm asked here. This is going to be a pretty different experience.

Harry could have deflected the question, but impulsively decided to be open, and share what had happened. "Yes, it did. I understand it talks to some people, not to others. It said several things to me, including that it was having a difficult time choosing a house for me." Harry wanted to be honest, but he didn't think it was a good idea to tell ten Slytherin first years that he had pleaded not to be put into their house. He decided to tell the truth, but change the emphasis. "The Hat couldn't decide between Gryffindor and Slytherin. It finally chose Gryffindor."

Students were mumbling and exchanging surprised and impressed looks. "Why did it choose Gryffindor?" David asked.

"I think, mainly because I asked it to. I had made a couple of friends on the train, and they went into Gryffindor, so I wanted to go there." This stirred more murmuring. A student near the front said, "You mean you can choose where you go?" David said, "I wish I'd thought of that," which caused a small murmur of laughter.

Harry was curious. "I assume you would have chosen Hufflepuff?"

"Well, yes... nothing against Gryffindor, seems like a great house, but I expected to be in Hufflepuff. I heard that most brothers get put in the same house."

"They often do, but not always," said Harry. "Did the Hat talk to you? Was that why you asked?"

"Yes, it did," David said. "It said it knew I wanted to go into Hufflepuff, but I was different from my brother, so it couldn't put me there. It said I would do well in Gryffindor."

"In that case, asking it wouldn't have done any good. It already had a strong opinion. In my case, it chose what I wanted because it didn't have a strong opinion. Or maybe because it knew it was important for me to be with my friends. I don't really know."

Harry was about to move off the topic when David raised his hand again. "Sir, those friends, are they Ron and Hermione?"

Harry was startled. How did he know that? Ah, Justin's brother, he thought. "I see your brother has told you a few things about his classes?"

"Oh, yes, and lots about you, and how Ron and Hermione help you. I remember when I was seven, that was the year he got Petrified, and so did Hermione, but you

and Ron went into the Chamber of Secrets, and you killed the great serpent that had taken Ginny Weasley."

Before Harry could answer, a girl piped up, "That's right, we asked Ginny about you last night, and she said you saved her life."

This caused greater murmuring. I'd better stop this before it gets out of hand, Harry thought. Who knows how many stories they've heard. "Okay, I think I want to stop this discussion before it gets too far. If you want to ask about stuff I've done in another class, that's okay, but there are some other things I think we should do today. Now..." he saw a boy in the back with his hand up. "Yes?" Harry asked.

"Please, sir, just one more... you met You-Know-Who? You fought him? How did you survive?" Harry felt the energy level of the students rise even more. They really want to know about this, from someone who's seen Voldemort with his own eyes. He wanted to move on, but he couldn't ignore the question.

"I met him, yes. I fought him, yes. How did I survive?" He paused for effect, then looked at them seriously. "I was incredibly lucky." The students laughed. Harry smiled. "It's true, really. Again, I can't tell you the whole story now, but maybe some other time."

Another girl spoke up. While raising her hand, she said, "That's okay, sir, I have the article, the interview you gave about when You-Know-Who came back. I can show anyone who wants to see it." This generated more interested comments.

"And you are...?"

"Andrea Creevey, sir."

Harry smiled. "How many more Creeveys are there?"

"I'm the last one, sir. My two brothers were in your Dumbledore's Army group last year," she said, Harry suspected, more for the benefit of the other students than for him, "and they said it was really great, they learned so much. Did you learn a lot from fighting You-Know-Who?"

Harry was starting to get tired of hearing that phrase. Be patient, he told himself, they're only first years, they don't know. But I'm going to have to tell them.

"First of all... you've all been saying 'You-Know-Who.' I know it's what most people say, but it's not what I say. His name..." Harry paused so they could steel themselves, "... is Voldemort."

Harry could have predicted the reaction: several shrieks, a lot of gasps, a few other random noises. Harry gave them a very serious look. "I know some of you will be scared to hear that. I know you're not used to it. But Professor Dumbledore told me five years ago to always use his name. He said, 'fear of the name of a thing only increases fear of the thing itself,' and he was right. We have to fight him, and how

can we fight him if we can't say his name? You're going to have to get used to it, and once you do, you'll think it's silly not to say his name. I want to hear you all saying his name in this class.

"Now, to answer your question, Andrea, no, I didn't learn magic from fighting him, I learned it because I knew I might have to fight him. I probably will have to in the future. He wants me dead." Most students' eyes went wide. "It gives me a real good reason to keep learning."

A sandy-haired boy near the front raised his hand. "Sir, You-Know- er, you-... do you want us to say his name?"

Harry nodded, encouraging the boy with his eyes. "If you can."

The boy seemed to be gathering all his strength. "Sir, if V- Voldemort-" He said it very fast; like ripping off a bandage quickly, Harry thought. He then exhaled sharply, as other students gasped. "...is the most powerful wizard in the world, and he wants you dead, how can you not be scared?"

Harry looked the boy over. "Before I answer your question, I want to know... what's your name?"

"Hedrick Flatt, sir."

"And which house are you in?"

"Slytherin."

"Do you know about the point system, Hedrick? How you can gain and lose points for your house?"

"Yes, sir." Hedrick looked very nervous.

"Well, Hedrick, you've just earned twenty points for Slytherin."

There was a collective gasp; apparently they knew that twenty points was a lot. "For saying his name?" asked Hedrick, flabbergasted.

"Yes. It was difficult for you to do it. It was brave of you. Obviously I can't give twenty points every time someone says his name. I will still give points, until you get used to it. But, Hedrick, you get twenty because you did it first. It's a good first step.. Now to answer your question... first of all, I don't agree that he's the most powerful wizard in the world. I believe the most powerful wizard in the world is Albus Dumbledore. I should know; I saw them fight, just over two months ago. Voldemort..." There were a few gasps, but not so many this time, "...got away, but he wasn't winning. He wasn't going to defeat Professor Dumbledore. Now, you wanted to know how I can not be scared... that's a good question." Harry paused for a moment, considering how to answer; he wasn't really sure. "The best answer I can think of is that I'm stubborn. I refuse to live scared. I don't want to die, but I won't live in fear, because that's not really living. He wants us to be scared of him, he wants us to

be afraid to say his name. I say his name as a way of defying him. He could kill me, but while I'm alive, I'll live the way I want to."

There was silence for a few seconds, then, to Harry's astonishment, a few students started clapping, until everyone had joined in. Harry was truly embarrassed now, though pleased; he had to imagine that this was the students' first exposure to anything but fear concerning Voldemort. Maybe this is why Dumbledore asked me to teach, he thought.

He walked back to the podium as the applause died out, and said, "Thank you. Now I need to call the roll. When I call your name, please raise your hand and say 'here.'" He ran through the roll. There was one more familiar name; it turned out that 'Brown, Heather' was Lavender's sister.

Harry walked out away from the podium again. He had discovered that he didn't like standing behind it; he liked to move around, especially to move nearer to whatever student was asking a question. "Okay. Now, as you know, this class is Defense Against the Dark Arts. There's a textbook, which I see everyone has. I advise you to read the textbook; there's a lot of good information in there. But you're not going to need to bring your textbooks to class anymore. We won't be using it here. In class, we're going to focus on practical things, not the kind of knowledge you get from a book. Normally, we would use the book. Does anyone know why we're doing mainly practical things?"

No one moved or spoke for a few seconds. Then Andrea Creevey raised her hand. "Yes, Andrea?"

Looking pleased that Harry had remembered her name, she said, "Because he... um... Because Voldemort came back." It sounded difficult for her to say it as well. There was only a mild reaction now. They're acclimating to it better than I expected, Harry thought.

"Yes, that's exactly right, Andrea, very good. And ten points to Gryffindor." She beamed with pleasure. "It's because he's back. Now, that doesn't mean you're going to have to fight him. But the problem with him being back is, it's not just him. He has helpers, assistants. They are called Death Eaters." There was a bit of a gasp. Andrea raised her hand again.

"Are they the ones you fought in June? At the Department of Mysteries?" This caused quite a rumbling as well.

"How did you know about that, Andrea?"

"Neville told Colin, sir. And Colin told Dennis and I."

"I see. Yes, we had to fight some Death Eaters. Now, as I was saying, he has assistants, including them. There are also people who he can put under a kind of mind control, to make them do what he wants. They don't want to follow him, but if he

controls them, they have no choice. There are also dementors, which he now controls. The more followers he has, the more danger everyone is in. Fifteen years ago, he was really powerful, because he had a lot of followers. Many people didn't know how evil he was until it was too late. Now we know, and we can fight him."

A Slytherin named Augustina Delva raised her hand. "How can we fight him?"

Harry was finding that the nervousness he had felt was fading rapidly, as he was focused on talking to the students. "You can't fight him with wands, Augustina, not yet. But you can fight him in different ways. You can fight him by saying his name. By not being scared of him. By making friends, both in your house and in other houses. By being kind to people."

Augustina was confused. "How will that help fight Voldemort?"

"Five points to Slytherin. Yes, Andrea? Do you know the answer to Augustina's question?"

"I think so, sir. After Cedric Diggory was killed... my brothers told me that Professor Dumbledore announced to the school who killed him, and he didn't say You-Know-Who, he said Voldemort. And he said that we had to be united, to make friends, so we could fight him as a group."

"Exactly, Andrea. Groups are stronger than individuals. The better we make friends, the better groups we make. And being kind to people helps make friends." The topic had come up in his dinner with Dumbledore; he now felt he understood it in a way he hadn't at the end of his fourth year. "This is a very difficult point in wizarding history. To get through it, we have to try harder than we normally would. My way of trying is teaching this class. Your way can be doing your best to do well. The better you do, the better you can protect yourself and your friends if you ever have to. Maybe you won't have to. I hope you won't. But it's better to be prepared." He looked around; there finally seemed to be no more questions.

"Okay, now we're going to start using our wands. The first thing to teach you is really easy, it's a kind of test spell. It's called 'Blue.' You point your wand at someone and say 'Blue,' and they turn blue. Now, everyone please get up, and move your desks to the side of the room. We want a lot of space. Now, get into pairs, and stand across from your partner. No, line up like this..." He eventually got them into two rows of ten, so he could observe them better. He felt even more comfortable now, doing things he had done in the D.A. "Good. Now, this side, point your wand at your partner and say, 'Blue!'"

"Blue!" many voices shouted. The other row of students now had faces of varying shades of blue. There was an outbreak of laughing and giggling.

"Good, very good. The color won't last for long, about fifteen seconds at most... see, it's already starting to go away. Okay, now this side, go!"

The other ten turned blue, to more laughter. Harry looked for the bluest one, and found that his partner was David Finch-Fletchley. "David, look, your partner is really blue," he said encouragingly. David blushed. Harry continued, "Now, that spell doesn't have much of a use most of the time, but it can be helpful in a class. I want to show you how. David, would you please do that spell on me?"

The other students laughed at David's obvious nervousness at turning his teacher blue. He pointed the wand at Harry, said "Blue." Harry looked at his hand, which was a deep shade of blue. He smiled. "I've always kind of liked blue," he said, to which most of the class laughed again. "Okay, now let's wait for it to go away... I asked David to do that because I want to show you something, and first I wanted you to see that the spell would work on me. Now, David, I want you to do the same thing again, okay?"

David nodded, raised his wand and shouted, "Blue," just as Harry said, "Protego!" Harry looked at his hand, which was its normal color. Some of the students oohed and ahed. "Does anyone know what I did?"

David raised his hand. "You did the Protection Charm."

"Yes, very good. Five points to Gryffindor."

A Slytherin named David Septus raised his hand and said, "But he didn't say 'Voldemort!'"

The class broke up laughing. Harry smiled. "No, but you did, so five points to Slytherin." Septus looked pleased. "But I don't only give points for saying 'Voldemort.' Like other teachers, I give them for correct answers, and other things I want to encourage. I just think that saying 'Voldemort' is an important first step, and giving points is my way of saying I think it's important." Harry was very pleased to note that there had been no flinching at all when he said 'Voldemort' most recently. That was a good sign.

"As I was saying, yes, that was the Protection Charm. It's one of the first things I want to teach you. Now, normally, we don't teach this spell until the third year. It can be a little difficult. But some of you will be able to do it well, and everyone will be able to do it at least a little. It's a very important one. I used it a lot at the Department of Mysteries." The class exchanged impressed looks. "To use this spell, you first need to imagine a shield in front of you. Everyone, do that now. Imagine a shield. It may help if you make it colorful, with its own design." Some students chuckled. "Mine is gold and red, with my house's symbol on it; choose whatever design you want. I think a design helps you see it better, and makes the spell better. Has everyone got the shield in their head? Okay, now for practice, hold your wands, imagine the shield, and say, 'Protego!'"

"Protego!" shouted twenty voices.

"Okay, good," said Harry. "Now, I want this side," gesturing to the ten students on his left, "to do the 'blue' spell when I say-

A Gryffindor near the back got overeager, and said 'Blue!' to his partner, who turned blue immediately. The rest of the class roared with laughter. Harry couldn't help laughing a little himself. "A little too soon, there, Eric, but I like the spirit. Let's wait a minute, for Devan to get back to his normal color. Okay, that's good. Now, when I say to, you ten try to turn your partner blue, and you ten do the Protection Charm. Got your shields in your mind?" The ten on his right nodded. "Okay, go ahead."

"Blue!"

"Protego!"

The results were mixed; some students were as blue as they had been before, but others were noticeably lighter shades of blue. Only David Finch-Fletchley was his usual skin color.

"David, I'm guessing you've done this before?"

He nodded. "Justin taught it to me."

"Well, he obviously did a good job," Harry observed. "Now, the results you saw were pretty good for a first try. What we'll do now is practice some more, each group taking turns, and I'll have a look at everybody."

The next half hour was spent practicing the spell, and to Harry's satisfaction, they did get better at it. He then talked for a while about basic ideas about magic, and ways for the students to get used to using magic if they didn't already know much about it. Before he knew it, he glanced up at the clock to see that it was 9:45. Wow, that was fast, he thought.

"It looks like we're almost out of time. Before we finish it up, does anyone have any questions? Yes, Eric."

"Voldemort," said Eric. The class was silent for a second, then erupted in laughter when they realized what he was doing.

"Very good, Eric, five points to Gryffindor," confirmed Harry, amused.

A Slytherin girl named Helen Clark raised her hand to ask, "Sir, this question has nothing to do with Voldemort, but..."

"...you wanted to get your five points," Harry finished.

"Yes, sir... my question is, last night in the Slytherin common room, Draco Malfoy and a few other people were... well, they were.."

Harry nodded. "Saying really awful things about me." She nodded. "And my friends, too, I'd guess."

"Yes, sir. Why does he say that? I mean, I hope all my classes are like this." There were definite murmurs of agreement.

Harry paused briefly, thinking. He knew it wasn't quite proper for a teacher to speak frankly about another student, but he quickly decided, too bad, I'm going to do it anyway. "Draco Malfoy doesn't like me because I don't agree with how he thinks about things. For example, I like Muggles. I think they're just as good as wizards. Malfoy thinks Muggles are worthless. Also, he judges wizards on whether they have any Muggle blood or not; I don't think it matters. He judges wizards on how much gold they have; I don't think that matters either. I think people should be judged on their actions, that's all. But he hates me more than other people because I'm famous." Harry briefly told them the story of their meeting on the Hogwarts Express, and how he'd put down Ron without even knowing him. "Now, the reason he said what he said is that he wants you to hate me, too. He wants all the Slytherins to hate me, so everyone will tell him he's right. All he wants is for people to agree with him, to tell him he's right. You can find out for yourself. If you say something that he disagrees with, he'll insult you, he'll tell you you're stupid and no good. It doesn't matter what it is, that's what he'll do.

"He's also angry at me now especially because his father's in trouble. Do you remember I mentioned that my friends and I had to fight some Death Eaters at the Department of Mysteries?" They nodded. "His father was one of them. He and some others were caught, by Professor Dumbledore, and are now in jail."

There was silence. Then David Finch-Fletchley asked, "Do you think Malfoy's going to become a Death Eater after he leaves Hogwarts?"

The class was rapt. Harry's first impulse was to say 'yes,' but then he remembered Dumbledore. "I don't know," he said. "I hope not. It looks like he will; he was gloating after Voldemort came back, gloating at Cedric Diggory's death, saying he hoped that Hermione would be next, because she's Muggle-born." Some students looked repulsed. "But we can never know what will happen in the future. Something could change. I hope it does."

He looked at the clock again. "Okay, we're almost out of time. Let me say this before we go: Always think for yourself. You can think 'Potter's class is good,' or 'Potter's class is terrible,' or you can think that Quidditch is exciting or that it's stupid. You can think whatever you want. But decide by yourself. Don't let someone else tell you what to think. Don't think something because you were told to. Decide for yourself. That's another way to fight Voldemort. He surrounds himself with people who let him think for them. You owe it to yourself, to think for yourself. And try to practice the Protection Charm before next lesson," he said quickly as the bell rang.

The students got up and started chattering among themselves immediately as they gathered their things for their next lessons. A few students approached

Harry's desk. The first to get there was Helen, who said, "I don't blame you for choosing Gryffindor. I was really upset last night. Now I know he's totally wrong."

Harry nodded sympathetically and said, "You can help change that. You and people like you can make Slytherin a better place." She thanked him, and left. Two Gryffindors just wanted to thank Harry, to say they enjoyed the lesson. He thanked them, and they left. Harry went back to the office to take a break.

Or at least he thought it was a break. He walked in to find Professor Dumbledore there waiting for him.

"Professor Dumbledore! You startled me, I didn't think anyone would be in here. Did you come to tell me something before my next class?"

"No, Harry. I must admit to having had a keen curiosity about how you would conduct your class. I hope you do not mind; I have been here since class started."

Harry was surprised. "Oh, well, of course I don't mind. I'd be really interested in any comments you have."

"Just one, Harry. Many teachers hide their true personality behind a shield; they put on a different persona, one of authority. Students always sense that, and it keeps them from making a personal connection with the teacher. You did not do that here; you were yourself. Keep doing that. That was as good a first class as I have ever seen. That is my comment." He patted Harry on the shoulder and walked out the back door of the office.

Harry felt himself fill with pride. The students clearly enjoyed it, and to have Dumbledore say that... this would be a good time to remember the next time I need a Patronus, Harry thought. He glanced at the office clock; there was five minutes until the next lesson. Harry closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind.

The second lesson went much like the first; many asked questions about him and his past, and some wanted to know about Voldemort. Again, he gave twenty points to the first student to say Voldemort's name, and again, the students clearly enjoyed it. Feeling quite good, Harry headed off to lunch. He found Ron and Hermione in their usual spots. He sat down.

"Well, I guess we don't have to ask you how your classes went," was Ron's first comment.

"Why not?" asked Harry, confused.

"Are you kidding?" Hermione said. "The whole school is buzzing with it. Your first class started telling people in the halls on their way to classes, and it's worked its way around. Apparently, they loved your class, and you're giving points for people saying Voldemort's name." She shook her head in admiration, and smiled.

"Well, I want to encourage them. If people stop fearing the name, I really think it'll be really good for our side. Actually, a Slytherin was the first to do it. I gave him twenty points."

"Twenty points?" gaped Ron. "That's not gonna help us," referring to the House Cup.

"He deserved it. He was the first one, and that's the hardest." He shook his head. "In some ways, it kind of reminded me of the Hog's Head. They really wanted to know about Voldemort, about the stuff I've done, that we've done. I made sure you two got credit."

"Great, now these first years'll be running up to me, all 'wow, you're friends with Harry Potter, can you tell us what it was like to fight with him?'" said Ron wryly.

Smiling, Hermione said, "Well, just don't tell them you were assaulted by a brain. It won't make you look good." Ron just made a face in response; Harry chuckled.

"In a way, today may have been my easiest class," Harry said. "These were brand-new students, Malfoy hasn't had time to indoctrinate them. As the class levels get higher, I'll get more and more resistance."

"Maybe, but you'll have a chance to win them over," Hermione pointed out. "Almost all of them don't hate you personally, but just because Malfoy told them to. If they like your class, they'll forget what Malfoy wants. It may not happen at once, but over the long term, you can do it."

"I hope you're right," Harry said.

"I am right. I was right when I said you'd be a great teacher, wasn't I?"

Just then, two first-year Gryffindor girls walked past them. They waved at Harry, said "Hi!", and walked on. About ten paces on, both giggled.

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "On second thought, why don't I just go ask them what they think, of how good a teacher you are?" Ron snickered.

"Yeah, but you thought Lockhart was a good teacher, and you were a year older than them," Harry pointed out. Ron laughed out loud.

Hermione pouted slightly. "Fine, here I'm trying to be nice to you, telling you how good you are, and you have to throw that back in my face." She looked at him accusingly. Harry wasn't sure how serious she was.

"Sorry, Hermione, I know you're trying to be nice," Harry said.

"Remember, Fred and George wouldn't fall for that, Harry, but you do," said Ron smugly.

Hermione made the same face at Ron that he'd made at her earlier. "That's because Harry's nicer than they are."

Two more girls came by, Hufflepuffs this time. They waved, but didn't say anything. After they walked off, Hermione said, "I'm beginning to wonder if this could start to be a problem for you, Harry. Remember that little fan club that always followed Viktor around and wouldn't give him a moment's peace? That could happen to you."

"And if it does, Harry," said Ron solemnly, "it will be my obligation, as your friend, to tease you about it mercilessly." He shrugged. "I'd rather not, but there you are."

"If you do, I'll start telling them that you did it all, that I just got the credit."

"Did I say I would tease you? I'm sorry, I meant to say 'help' and 'support.'"

Hermione chuckled. "You laugh now, but it could be annoying."

"Let's just say that when I worried about the problems I'd have being a teacher, this was not even close to being one of them," Harry said. "But it may not happen. This could go away."

"Or, it could be worse. I mean, when I fancied Lockhart, I never for a moment thought I could ever have him. I knew it was just a schoolgirl crush. But you're only five years older than these girls. They might think it was possible, especially in a few years."

"Are you trying to make Harry feel better, or worse, Hermione?" asked Ron. "It's hard to tell."

"I'm just trying to prepare Harry for what might happen. But you'll be fine, Harry. If it happens, just pretend you don't notice, and be kind and polite. They'll get over it."

"I'm still hoping it won't happen in the first place, but thanks, I'll try to remember that," Harry said. "So, I have an idea. Let's change the subject to one that doesn't involve making fun of me. Hey, I know... Hermione, you mentioned Krum. What's going on with that? Have you heard from him lately?"

She shook her head, wearing an expression that suggested she was sad or indifferent; Harry wasn't sure which. "Just a short letter, about four months ago. It didn't say anything definitive, but it was enough to know that nothing's going to happen with that. I didn't really expect anything would, because we were so far apart, and it wasn't as though I was ga-ga over him anyway. He's nice, and everything, but... I thought of him as more of a friend, and I couldn't get to know him that well. Also, he isn't the best correspondent in the world. We're on good terms, though, I think, there just isn't the desire on either of our parts to make that kind of effort. So, does that answer your question, or were you just asking to change the subject and don't really care?"

Harry raised his eyebrows slightly at the accusation. "No, I was interested," he assured her. Not in quite that level of detail, he added to himself, but he knew that was how Hermione was.

The subject changed again, and it eventually worked its way around to Potions. Harry told them about his plan with Snape, and what Dumbledore had advised.

"Good luck, mate, that's going to be tough," said Ron.

"It's a very good idea, Harry," encouraged Hermione. "I'll help you. If you get angry, just look at me, I'll remind you to be calm. Remember, nothing he says means anything, it's just words."

"I'll try. Actually, I think I'm going to head off. I wanted to spend an hour or so in the teachers' staff room before Potions. See what goes on in there, if anyone has anything to say. It might be interesting."

"Ooh, I wish I could go with you, Harry," gushed Hermione. "I would definitely do what you're doing. I want to hear all about it!"

Ron smiled. "Yeah, Harry, me too! It'll be so cool to-"

"Oh, shut up," a frowning Hermione said to Ron, who was now laughing.

"See you two later," Harry said, and headed off for the staff room.

Harry had been in the staff room for the pre-term meeting, but never as the place where teacher relaxed between classes. He walked in, saw that there were seven teachers in the room, and that Snape was not one of them.

"Professor Potter," said McGonagall, standing up to greet Harry. "The headmaster has just been in here, giving us his report of your lesson. It is just as well that you were absent; you were no doubt spared considerable embarrassment."

"He told me what he thought after my first lesson," Harry said, "so yes, you're probably right. He was being very kind."

"And your first-years as well, who are right this minute spreading superlatives about your performance? Really, Harry, if you wish to be modest, you must at least recognize enough of the truth to make it believable. I have been teaching at this school for forty years, and I cannot recall when the students were so excited about a lesson. Your early students came to my class directly after yours, and it took me ten minutes just to get them settled down! I had to threaten detentions, and so on. Then hands kept going up, asking all sorts of questions about you, the things you've done, what you were like as a first-year, and so on. We finally did get down to business, but we did not get very far." She gave him a piercing glare, but Harry was sure that it wasn't serious.

"I'm sorry, Professor," he said, smiling.

"No, you're not, nor should you be. Without even trying, you have done what we all hope to do-you have inspired your students. You should be proud."

"I am, I really am. I'm just also overwhelmed. I never in a million years thought this would happen. That's really the truth. I was just hoping nothing bad would happen."

"Well, it looks like nothing did, but you may have a problem with an overabundance of female interest," smiled Professor Smith. "I happened to see what was happening as you ate your lunch." He told the other teachers, who chuckled.

Harry feigned annoyance. "Don't worry, Professor, Ron and Hermione have already teased me about it. It's good of you to take an interest, though."

"No problem, Harry. And I did ask you to call me 'John,' didn't I?"

"Yes, you did, John. Sorry. Some things are a bit hard to get used to."

Harry sat down on a sofa next to Professor Flitwick. Professor Sprout said, "I got your students after Minerva did. She had managed to calm them down a bit, but they were still talking about it."

"You mean, they didn't come in talking about their extraordinary Transfigurations lesson?" McGonagall asked Sprout, in her usual deadpan.

"Terribly sorry, Minerva."

Snape walked into the room. "Professor Potter," Snape said, surprisingly without his usual sneer or sarcastic tone, just a polite formality. "You have the Slytherin first years running around using the Dark Lord's name as though it were a new Chocolate Frog card. I would not have thought it possible."

Harry decided to be just as polite. "You don't seem to think that's a good thing, Professor. Don't you agree with Professor Dumbledore that fear of the name—"

"Of a thing only increases fear of the thing itself, yes, I have heard the headmaster say that," interrupted Snape. "I agree with him in principle. However, the wizarding community has made that name taboo for a long time. You are attempting to demolish a part of the social structure. Your actions may have unintended consequences."

Harry thought for a minute. "I admit that it's hard for me to know that, but it just seemed like a really good idea. Also, Professor Dumbledore totally approved of everything I did."

Snape sighed, still being amazingly polite, for him. "The headmaster is not perfect, as he would be the first to admit. He also has a particular affection for you, which may cloud his better judgment."

McGonagall took immediate offense. "Professor Snape! Really! If I did not know of the esteem in which you hold the Headmaster—"

"But you do, Professor. And you know that I am right."

A golden dog nosed its way in through the barely open door. All the teachers kept an eye on it, wondering who it would be for. It walked up to Harry, jumped into

his lap, pawed at his chest, and licked his face. Harry chuckled and petted it. "I really like this dog," he said to the room in general, looking into the dog's eyes. "It's very affectionate. I never had one, but I would have liked one like this." He petted it a bit more, then shooed it off his lap as he got up. He now noticed the teachers staring at him, or looking at each other with expressions that shared far more with each other than with Harry. Snape in particular wore a look that spoke volumes, but Harry couldn't understand those volumes. "What?" he asked nobody in particular.

"You should not keep the headmaster waiting, Professor Potter," said McGonagall, wearing her usual poker face. The other teachers' expressions were no easier to read. Harry was sure something was up, but he had no idea what it could be, and they obviously weren't going to tell him. Not wanting to keep Dumbledore waiting, however, he got up to leave, following the dog.

Harry reached Dumbledore's office in less than a minute; the dog had almost vanished when he walked up the steps to Dumbledore's waiting door. Harry found himself wishing that the dog could stay around for awhile as he entered the office.

"Ah, Harry, please sit down. I know you have a class in not too long a time; this will just take a moment. This is in the nature of a precaution; Professor Snape has received intelligence suggesting a greater-than-average likelihood that Voldemort will again attempt to access your mind while you are asleep. It may not happen at all, or it may happen but you ward it off in your sleep. I know you are being careful about practicing Occlumency, and there should be no problems. I simply wanted you to know about this information, since we have it and it relates to you."

"Thank you, Professor, I appreciate it," Harry said.

"No problem at all, Harry. Off you go then, you don't want to be late."

Harry went back to the teachers' room to get his bag, then headed off to Potions. He ran into Hermione on the way, and told her about Snape's odd politeness.

"Strange," she agreed. "You're still ready to deal with his usual attitude, though?"

"Yes, I'm not expecting this to continue," he assured her.

But to their great surprise, Snape kept up whatever he was doing. All through Potions, he made no special note of Harry, and did not bother him in any way. As they walked along the corridors after class, Harry told Hermione after the class that he was almost as unnerved by this as by Snape's usual unpleasant attitude.

"Why do you think he's being this way?" asked Hermione.

"I'm not sure, of course, but I have to imagine it's because I'm a professor now," Harry answered. "My guess would be either that he knows he has to treat me with a certain politeness for that reason, or maybe he was told to by Professor Dumbledore."

"Too bad he couldn't have told him that five years ago," commented Hermione. Harry nodded in agreement.

Just then, they were joined by Professor Smith, walking alongside them. "Hello, Harry, Hermione," he said cheerfully.

"Hi, John," said Hermione. Harry remembered that she had taken Muggle Studies for a year, but he was mildly surprised that she called him by his first name; he guessed that John had all of his students do that. "Did you want to talk to your fellow professor?" she asked with a smile at Harry.

"I did, actually. Harry, my office isn't too far from here. Would you join me there for a minute?"

"Sure. Is it okay if Hermione joins us?"

"Hmmm... well, this is kind of personal, but I know how close you three are, so I don't mind." He steered them into his office. Harry wondered what could be so personal; he hardly knew John, after all. He hadn't realized that John obviously asked all his students to call him by his first name.

John stood, leaning against his desk. "This is about what you saw in the staff room, where you saw people giving funny looks but you didn't know why."

Harry quickly explained to Hermione what had happened.

"Have you told Hermione about the dog?" asked John. Harry nodded. "How many times have you been summoned by it? Did it react the same way each time?"

"Twice, and yes, it was, like, normal friendly dog behavior." Harry wondered what this was all about.

John looked at Harry seriously. "Harry, I've been at Hogwarts for six years. The other teachers and I have all been summoned by that dog dozens of times. The dog walks up to the teacher, and stands there until it senses that the teacher is ready to follow, and then it starts walking. It has never jumped into anyone's lap, or behaved affectionately."

"Maybe he changed its behavior recently," Harry suggested.

John shook his head. "Another teacher was summoned shortly before you arrived in the staff room. The dog did what it normally does. It was only different for you."

Harry was starting to wonder why that would be, when he saw Hermione's eyes fly wide open. "You know, the problem with being Hermione's friend is that I often end up feeling like I'm rather slow. She gets things much faster than I do. Okay, Hermione, what is it?"

"Harry... I think John is trying to say that the dog's affection for you is a mirror of Professor Dumbledore's affection for you. He probably doesn't even know the dog is doing it, does he, John?"

John nodded. "The staff think not," he agreed. "There was quite a bit of conversation about it after you left, Harry. The staff wanted to talk about it, but we were also a little embarrassed about doing so. We felt as if we had unknowingly invaded Professor Dumbledore's privacy."

Harry was still confused. "Well, I know he likes me, of course, but he likes a lot of people. Am I still not getting something?"

Hermione smiled at him tolerantly. "I think what John is saying is that what Professor Dumbledore feels for you is something stronger... more like what one feels for a family member. Like a son, or a grandson." She looked at John, who nodded.

"That's why the staff were so surprised, Harry. I don't think the staff quite understood the depth of Dumbledore's feelings for you, and they were momentarily taken aback by such an obvious expression, if unconscious. Most of them thought it was sweet, though. Professor Sprout particularly liked how you returned the dog's affection with what she referred to as 'innocent enthusiasm.'"

Hermione smiled at Harry. "That's so sweet... you know, it says a lot about you that he feels this way about you."

Harry felt overwhelmed; he knew that dealing with emotion was not one of his strong points. "What should I do?" he asked them both.

"I don't think you should do anything differently, Harry, unless you really want to," said John. "I'm just telling you because I don't think it's right that the teachers should know something so personal about you, but have you not know it yourself. But you should especially not do anything differently the next time the dog comes for you. You should pet it, do whatever you did before. Don't be afraid to enjoy its affection. If you start acting awkward, the teachers will figure out that you know, and they'll be more embarrassed. But there's nothing to be embarrassed about, really. Now that the teachers know, like I said, they think it's nice. So do I. Don't worry about it. Just enjoy it, keep it in your heart. It's quite an honor, and like Hermione says, it says a lot about you."

Harry still felt overwhelmed, but what John was saying was starting to sink in. Is that why he was so angry about what Snape did to me in Occlumency that Hermione was able to notice it? he wondered. Why he was so kind to me after Sirius died? He felt very proud, because he had such great respect for Dumbledore.

"Okay, well, thanks for telling me," he said to John.

"Sure, Harry. Take it easy. Hermione, it's good to see you again. I really wished you could have stayed in my class. Very few students have the kind of enthusiasm for their classes that you do."

She smiled. "Thank you, John, I wish I could too. See you later." She and Harry left, heading for Gryffindor Tower.

As they walked, she said, "I guess you're still pretty overwhelmed, huh?" He nodded. "Well, you probably shouldn't dwell on it too much. I think the important thing is to try to be comfortable with it. I mean, you knew that Sirius loved you, that he regarded you like a family member. Were you comfortable with that?"

"I suppose so," he said. "It wasn't something that I thought about so much. It was always just, sort of, there."

They were passing near the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. "Harry, could we come in here for a minute?" She guided him into the room and headed for his office in the back. "I just wanted to be able to make sure we weren't overheard. I thought it might be good to talk about this."

Harry's face was open, but he wasn't quite sure what she was driving at. He motioned for her to go ahead and say what she wanted to say.

"I was just thinking that this might be difficult for you because... well, you were kind of emotionally disadvantaged as a child. Your aunt and uncle were mean to you most of the time. Basically, you had never been loved. You had never had anyone tell you they loved you, or act like it. That had to affect you. People need love, Harry. People need to know they're cared about. I'm wondering if this information about Dumbledore is hard for you to process because there's that lack in your past."

Harry thought. "I'm not sure I could know that. You might be in a better position to know than me. I assume that's what you think?"

"It seems likely. Let me ask you something. Remember that love isn't only romantic, but also a feeling of great attachment, great closeness. Now, how many people can you think of that love you?"

Harry had never thought about this. "I don't know... I suppose Sirius did... Mrs. Weasley, I guess..." He continued thinking.

"You can't think of anybody else, Harry?" she asked prompting him with her eyes.

Harry saw what was in her eyes, then looked down, then back up. "You mean, you?"

With barely concealed frustration, she blurted out, "Yes, I mean me! Come on, Harry, you know it, you couldn't not know it. I love you. Ron loves you, though he'd rather die than admit it. Ginny loves you. And so does Professor Dumbledore."

"I'm sorry, I'm not trying to be slow. Maybe you're right about my childhood. It seems strange for me to think in terms of love; it's more like it's a theory instead of something that has any connection to me."

"Well, that's one of the reasons I wanted to talk about it," Hermione said. "I think the more you think about it, the more you open yourself up and feel it, the more you'll get used to it, and the better off you'll be."

"I just realized something... when you said you loved me just a minute ago... that was the first time anybody had ever said that to me," Harry said, with a kind of surprised look, almost like he'd had a revelation.

Tears sprang to Hermione's eyes; Harry could tell that she was thinking of what it must have been like for him, never having heard that. She rushed forward and hugged him. "I do love you, Harry," she said through her tears.

He hugged her back tightly. He knew what he wanted to say, what he should say, but it was difficult. Finally he managed it. "I know. I love you too." She squeezed him harder. "And Ron, and Ginny, and Mrs. Weasley, and Sirius... and I suppose Professor Dumbledore, too... I just had never thought about it like that. I guess you know you love somebody if you'd be seriously upset to lose them, like I was with Sirius."

"Yes, that's a good way of putting it," she agreed, still holding him. "Let me ask you something..." She took a half-step back so she could see his eyes, still holding his shoulders. "Did you cry after Sirius died?"

"I think a little bit... I was sitting under that tree, the day after he died... I tried not to, though, I didn't want anyone seeing me."

"I know, Harry, but it probably would have been better if you had," she said earnestly. "There's a reason we cry. We need to release our feelings. It's not healthy if we hold it in. There's nothing wrong with crying. Look at me, I do it all the time, even for stupid reasons sometimes." She smiled.

"I guess I don't think there's anything wrong in your case because you're a girl. I always thought men weren't supposed to cry."

"A lot of people think that," she acknowledged, "but it's stupid. Men need to cry just like women do, they just suffer more for not doing it."

"Well, I'll try to keep that in mind the next time I feel like crying," Harry said, half-seriously. "I should take your advice, you know this better than I do."

"Yes, you should," she agreed, with a smile. She let go of him. "C'mon, we'd better get back to Gryffindor Tower if we're going to get any work done before dinner. You still wanted help with Potions, right?"

"Yeah, I did. But do you mind if we do it here? I'm just not in the mood to be around a bunch of people right now."

"Sure, Harry," she said quietly. "No problem." She pulled out her Potions text.

"And Hermione... thanks."

She smiled her acknowledgment, and they got to work. As they started working, Harry noticed that he felt more comfortable, a kind of satisfaction of being in the presence of someone who cared for him so much. He wondered if he had come to take Ron and Hermione and others who cared for him for granted. I don't want to do that, he thought. Then don't, he answered. He then asked Hermione to repeat the last thing she'd said, and he went back to focusing on Potions.

Chapter 9

Consequences

Tuesday's lessons went roughly as Monday's had. In some ways, that was to be expected; the second years were more or less first years in terms of their Defense Against the Dark Arts knowledge, as they had never had a useful class under Umbridge. Harry's worry that the Slytherins might be more problematic proved unfounded; they seemed almost as enthusiastic as the Slytherin first years. He wondered if it was because after a year of Umbridge, any halfway decent class looked really good by comparison.

Wednesday's classes went well also, with a slight hitch with the Slytherins; two of the ten Slytherin students left the class in the first ten minutes with symptoms that were obviously from Skiving Snackboxes. He decided not to make an issue of it, and the other Slytherins stayed and appeared to enjoy the lesson.

Thursday presented an escalating problem; four Slytherin fourth years skived off of Harry's class using the Snackboxes. He knew he would have to act soon; he just wanted the violation to be sufficiently flagrant that the need for action would be obvious.

Harry was in the staff room at lunchtime talking to Professor McGonagall about the situation when an owl flew in and dropped a letter on his head. The letter fell to the floor, and Harry picked it up. It was from Helen Clark, the Slytherin first-year girl. He read silently.

Dear Professor Potter,

I wanted to tell you about what is going on here. It's really bad. You were right about Malfoy. He's really mad at all the first and second years because they like you and your class. He's being terrible, making threats and saying awful things. Hedrick tried to write you a letter, but Malfoy caught him and did a curse on him. He's okay, but he was really upset. I'm writing this on my bed so no one can see me, and I'm going to sneak off to the owlery.

I also wanted to tell you that Malfoy is trying to make all the Slytherins get out of your classes using those candies that make you sick. He yelled at some of the third years that didn't use them, and now he's saying bad things are going to happen to the fourth and fifth years if they don't. He gave everyone in your classes the candies, but there's no way I'm using one, I don't care what he does to me. He's so awful, Professor Potter. Why did the Sorting Hat ever put me here? I wish I had asked the hat to put me someplace else like you did. Please help us if you can.

Helen

Harry read the letter with mounting fury. I should have known this was going to happen, he thought. He was bothered less by the Skiving Snackbox campaign than the attacks on the younger students. Is there nothing he won't stoop to? wondered Harry.

"That son of a bitch..." he muttered.

The teachers stared; McGonagall dropped the folder she was holding.

"Professor Potter! We do not use language like that-"

He glared at her and interrupted her. "Read this!"

Shocked at his anger, she took the letter and read. Her face reflected her growing dismay. The other teachers looked on, wondering what was going on. Finally she finished. "While your language was inappropriate, I sympathize with the sentiment. Would you like me to talk to Professor Snape about this?"

He shook his head. "Malfoy'll just lie to him, and then be twice as horrible to the first and second years. No, I'm going to go have a chat with Malfoy. Your evenings might be getting busy soon, Professor. Excuse me." He stormed out.

He headed toward the Great Hall, hoping that Malfoy was still there, with as many Slytherins as possible around. He got his wish; Malfoy was there with his usual group of sixth years. Snape was nowhere around, so Harry would get no opposition. He stood at the part of the teachers' table which was closest to the Slytherins. Malfoy was about a third of the way down the hall from Harry, but Harry had decided that he wasn't moving off that spot.

He raised his voice considerably. "Malfoy! Get down here!"

The hall came to a near-hush. Malfoy looked over in incredulity. "Get stuffed, Potter."

"I'm a teacher, Malfoy. You should say, 'Get stuffed, Professor Potter.'" Many of the students in the hall laughed. "Now, get over here."

"No way. Who do you think you are?"

"I think, Malfoy, that I'm going to give you an hour of detention for every thirty seconds that you're not over here, starting now. It's up to you."

Malfoy stared at Harry mutinously for about twenty-five seconds, then muttered something and walked over to where Harry was standing. "What?" he sneered.

Harry let his temper guide him. "Listen, Malfoy. I know you hate my guts, and I don't care. But you are not going to disrupt my classes. I'm not stupid. Do you think I don't recognize the symptoms of a Skiving Snackbox? Also, you're a prefect. You're supposed to be enforcing the school rules, not making sure they're violated. You had damn well better make sure it stops, do you understand me?"

Looking smug, Malfoy said, "I don't know what you're talking about, Potter. Do you mean those foul things the Weasleys sell? You wouldn't catch me in that shop of theirs."

"Yeah, because they'd throw you out, you had to have done it by owl order. You can deny it all you want, I know what I know. So, here's the deal, Malfoy. Every student tomorrow, from whatever house... if anyone uses anything from a Snackbox, they get an hour detention. If anyone from Slytherin uses them, they get an hour detention, and you get an hour detention for every Slytherin that uses one. So, if all ten Slytherins use them tomorrow, that's ten hours of detention for you."

Malfoy fumed. "You can't do that! You have no proof!"

"I don't need proof, I can do this if I want. And don't bother complaining to Professor Snape, he can't overrule me. Now, I suggest you use your influence as a prefect to make sure that the students follow the school rules. Good day, Malfoy." Harry turned and left. The students in the hall, most of whom could not have overheard the conversation, nonetheless applauded, knowing that Malfoy had been taken down a peg. Harry headed back to the teachers' room.

He walked in and headed straight for McGonagall. "Professor, I apologize-"

She cut him off. "No need, Harry. I'm sure you have great affection for your first years, and this would be enough to anger anyone. What did you do just now?"

With the other teachers listening in casually but avidly, Harry told her. She pursed her lips.

"Giving detentions without solid proof is very problematical, Professor. We frown on it, because to be allowed to do so invites abuse. I know you are absolutely sure of this, and I'm sure you are right. It sounds very much like something he would do. But this starts to tread a very fine line."

"Minerva," said Professor Sprout, "given that this is Malfoy, I think that Professor Potter should be given some license. And the letter is evidence, of a sort."

My feeling is that Professor Potter is well within his rights." Other teachers chimed in to agree. It was obvious that Malfoy had no friends in the staff room.

McGonagall sighed. "I suppose you have a point. I simply want to impress on Professor Potter, as he is new, that we prefer a high standard of proof to a low one."

"It's not only that, Professor," Harry pointed out, "but this isn't just a few people skiving off. This is a direct, organized challenge to my authority. We knew something like this would happen. I have to take strong action, or there'll be no end to it."

"Very well," she conceded. "I would advise you, however, to inform Professor Dumbledore of these developments, and get his advice before proceeding."

Harry nodded and picked up the letter. "I wanted to anyway, but I wouldn't have wanted to bother him with it. But I'll be happy to."

"On occasions when you are contemplating giving out detentions of such a quantity, it is not a 'bother' for the headmaster to become involved," McGonagall said.

"I just hope he can do something to help those poor Slytherins," Harry lamented. He left for Dumbledore's office.

By the time he arrived, Harry had worked himself into more anger. He stopped in front of the office and took a few deep breaths. No point in dumping anger all over Dumbledore, Harry thought. He'll do what he can. Harry entered the office.

"Good afternoon, Harry. What is troubling you today?"

Obviously I'm still angry enough that it's on my face, Harry thought. "I got this letter a half hour ago from a Slytherin first year." Dumbledore read it, and Harry laid out the rest of what had happened.

"I wish I could have seen Minerva's face when you said that," smiled Dumbledore. "I do not see her looking surprised too often. Well, here is what I recommend. If more than a few Slytherins use the Snackboxes tomorrow, you will send them to Madam Pomfrey's, and make sure they stay there for the rest of the period. I will visit them and question them. If I am satisfied that the statements in the letter are true, I will question Mr. Malfoy personally about the accusations. How will that be?"

Harry thought that sounded very reasonable; he was glad that Dumbledore was willing to use his talent as a Legilimens to this end. No doubt the idea of Malfoy tormenting first years was disturbing to him as well. "It sounds fine, sir. How will I let you know when I want you to come? It'll be in the middle of the lesson, and I don't want to lose too much time."

"You should summon Fawkes. I will show you how to do it." To Harry's surprise, Fawkes flew onto his shoulder; he felt that Fawkes seemed awfully light. "Now, Harry, move your wand like this, and say 'Fawkes.'" Harry did so. "Good. If you wish my attention, say my name while holding his tail, and he will take you to me. If you wish to go to another place, say the name of the place, and do the same; he will take you there. Do you understand?"

Harry did. He was amazed that Dumbledore was giving him permission to use Fawkes; Harry seriously doubted that the privilege was granted to many, if any, others. "Yes, sir, thank you. I was thinking, though, that it might be better if I questioned them before you did; I want to be on record as the one assigning the detentions if they're going to respect my authority. I can call you after I've finished. What do you think?"

"Yes, that will be fine," agreed Dumbledore.

"Thank you, sir. I just wish there was something I could do for those kids. It's doubly frustrating because Malfoy's taking his anger at me out on them."

"Yes, indeed, one finds that when in positions of authority, others can suffer the consequences of one's actions. It is often not pleasant."

Harry felt that Dumbledore must have been referring to recent situations in which Harry had suffered for Dumbledore's actions; he realized that the shoe was on the other foot now. "I didn't blame you for those things, sir. I hope the Slytherin first years don't blame me."

"I believe they will know who is responsible for their situation, and that it is not you," Dumbledore said. Harry hoped he was right. He thanked Dumbledore and left.

He went to the Great Hall to look for Ron and Hermione, and he found them at their usual spot, chatting before their Care of Magical Creatures class. When they saw Harry, they broke into applause, as did several nearby Gryffindors. Others sitting nearby laughed at the scene.

As he sat down, Harry said, "Well, I guess I don't need to tell you."

"Part of it," corrected Ron. "We know you gave Malfoy hell and threatened him with all kinds of detentions, and that you think he's behind these skivings you've had and is planning more. The only thing we don't know is exactly why you think it. We assume you have a pretty good idea, or else you wouldn't have done that."

"Also, 'eyewitnesses on the scene,' as the Muggle news shows like to say, said that they'd never seen you so angry," Hermione said. "And also that you deliberately humiliated Malfoy by making him go to where you were, instead of coming to him."

"And we couldn't be more proud," smiled Ron. "So, what's the rest of it?"

Harry showed them the letter; they reacted much as he did. "I wouldn't have thought he could get any lower... attacking first years! And him a prefect!" fumed Hermione.

"His prefect's badge has never been anything but a license to bully, we've known that for a while now," pointed out Ron. "But, yes, this is below despicable. I'd say that you restrained yourself well, mate."

"I couldn't yell at him for harassing the first years, much as I wanted to, because I can't let him know about the letter. If he even knows it exists, even not knowing who wrote it, all the first years'll be in trouble. So I had to focus on the Snackboxes."

"Do you think they'll still be in trouble?" asked Hermione.

"It all depends," said Harry. "I think the second years will support them, as well as some of the third and fourth. I think the ones who didn't skive are the type that aren't in Malfoy's pocket. There may be a kind of internal battle at Slytherin; not everyone there wants to be a Death Eater. People are just intimidated by the few that are there. If Malfoy's power can be reduced, the younger ones may be safer." He sighed. "I didn't think anything like this would happen, but I guess I should have expected it."

"That's true, Harry," said Hermione. "This was going to happen no matter what, if the young Slytherins liked your classes. Malfoy wasn't going to stand for that."

"The worst thing is, I can't write her back, because somebody could yank it out of her hand when she gets it, and then she's in a world of trouble," Harry said. "But... there is maybe something I could do," while looking down the table at a group on Gryffindor first years. He got up and headed in their direction. As he walked away, he barely heard Ron saying, "Well, he could've told us about it first..."

At 4:30, Harry walked into the library wearing his Invisibility Cloak. It had been a while since he'd used it, and he reflected on the irony that he was using it now to do something not at all against the rules. He looked through the stacks and found Helen walking through them, pretending to be interested in books. He walked up next to her.

"Helen," he whispered.

"Professor? Where are you?"

"I'm right next to you. I'm going to show myself. Make no noise, okay?"

She nodded; he made sure no one was watching, then flipped up enough of the cloak that she could see him. She gasped, but silently.

"Professor! What is that? What are you doing?" she whispered.

"Stand next to me, closer." She did. "We're going to my office, it's not far from here. Don't say anything until we get there." She nodded.

They walked silently out of the library, Harry leading, careful not to make noise or be bumped into by unsuspecting passersby. They went down the hall, turned, and walked down another hall, passing Pansy Parkinson along the way. They walked into the classroom and over to his office. He took off the cloak and shut the door.

"Okay," Harry said. "Sorry about all that."

"What is that?" she asked, looking at the cloak with awe. "I've never seen one."

"It's an Invisibility Cloak. I hear they're really rare. It was my father's. Professor Dumbledore happened to have it when my father died, and he gave it to me when I came to Hogwarts. It's come in handy more than once."

"Wow, it's so neat, I'd love to have one."

"Yeah, they're pretty great," he agreed, sitting down and gesturing for her to do so as well. "I asked David to have you meet me in the library for the same reason that I assume you wrote me instead of coming to see me; you could be in trouble from Malfoy and his friends if you're seen. Right?"

She nodded. "But why didn't you just write me back?"

"Anybody could walk up to you and grab a letter out of your hand, and then it's the same problem. You can send an owl secretly, but you can't get an owl secretly."

"Oh, I didn't think of that," she admitted. Then she smiled. "I heard what you did to Malfoy at lunch. That was so great. All us first years were so happy."

"I wish I could have done more," Harry said earnestly. "I wasn't that bothered about the students skiving my class. I would've done something about it, but I wasn't angry. But how he's treating you and the others... unfortunately, that's the thing I'm most angry at, and can do the least about. I can give you advice, but that's about it."

"I know. We've found out that there's not much we can do. The only one who could help us is Professor Snape, and he doesn't seem to care. I didn't know if you could do much, but I had to try."

"It still may help, just not in a way you'd expect. I showed your letter to Professor Dumbledore, and he's concerned as well. I didn't show it to Professor Snape, and I don't plan to. I won't risk your name getting back to Malfoy."

Helen looked like she might cry. "What can we do, Professor? It shouldn't be like this. You said you had some advice?"

"There are things you can do. One of them is something I said in class-make friends, be together. For example... are all the Slytherin first years together in this? Do you all feel the same way?"

She nodded. "Yes, we do, all ten of us. And all of the second years too, we think. We're not sure, but we think there might be some third and fourth years also."

"Good. That's a good start, right there. If you're all together, there's much less he can do to you. He's a prefect, and I know he abuses his power. He can curse a student, like he did Hedrick, and get away with it. But he can't curse all ten of you and get away with it. If you and the second years all stick together, he almost has to leave you alone. If he curses or insults one of you, the others can't give in, they have to risk the same thing.

"You see, Helen, this is how bad people with power push around good people without it. They pick one person, hurt him, and say to the others, this will happen to you if you don't do what we say. The people are scared, and they don't fight, and the bad people keep their power. But if the good people are united, if they say 'we'll fight you even if you hurt one or five or ten of us,' then the bad people can't win so easily. They have to fight or run. Sometimes they run, sometimes they fight."

"Like you fight Voldemort..." she said, seeing Harry's point.

"Yes. He could kill me, he could kill my friends. He killed one in June, someone I really cared about. But we can't stop fighting him, because then he would have power and could do any terrible things he wanted. We have to fight, to be who we want to be. Your situation is not that bad. Malfoy can't kill you, and he can't hurt you badly. He can embarrass you with curses, he can bully you, he can insult you. The question is, how much are you willing to deal with in order not to give up, in order to be the people you want to be? That's what you and the others have to work out."

"We hate him," she said fervently. "We really hate him. I know I'll do whatever it takes, and I think the others will, too." Harry didn't know if that was true for the others, but he could see it was true for her; she was clearly serious.

"This is a bit of what I meant in the class, about sticking together. The more people you have, the better, but you have to be careful that the people really are with you, and aren't just saying they are. But if enough people are with you, Malfoy could lose his influence, and have much less power."

"But he has lots of friends, doesn't he? Those two big guys, the other prefect, some other people who laugh at his jokes?"

"Those aren't his friends, Helen. Those are his allies, which is very different. Allies are together to have power, to share power. If Malfoy didn't have power, most of them wouldn't stay with him. Here's the difference: Ron and Hermione are my friends. We care about each other a lot, and we've all risked our lives for each other. We fight for each other, like they fought with me at the Department of Mysteries. I promise you that there are no Slytherins who would risk their lives for Malfoy.

That's his weakness. You have to be friends with each other, like each other, help each other. That makes you stronger. You notice how I got a Gryffindor first year to help me? If he wasn't friendly with some Slytherins, I couldn't be talking to you now."

"But doesn't it take time to make friends?"

"Yes, it can. But sometimes it happens really fast. Sometimes you make friends faster if you have problems together, it makes you come together to solve them. One thing about life is, you never know what's going to happen. It's an adventure."

She nodded glumly. "A really hard adventure, right now."

Harry couldn't argue. "I wish I could do more for you. I wish I could wave my wand and make it go away, or make Malfoy go away. I'll do what I can, but it's mainly you and the others. You have to stand up for yourselves, for each other."

Now she looked determined. "We will. We'll defy him, like you do Voldemort."

Harry nodded proudly. "You remember what you said in your letter, wondering why you were put in Slytherin? She nodded. "I have a guess. It might be wrong, but I think the Sorting Hat put you and the others in Slytherin to change it. We need to be united to fight Voldemort, the Hat knows that, but Malfoy and his friends like Voldemort and don't like Dumbledore. If you and those who think like you do can stand up to Malfoy, the people who want to think for themselves will join you, and then everyone in Slytherin can say what they want. Then all four houses can work together. You know how Slytherins are supposed to have ambition, and Gryffindors courage? I think the Hat put the courageous people in Slytherin this time, because it knew they would have to fight."

She looked at him, glowing. Harry got the feeling she would run through fire right now if she was asked to. If he asked her to, he corrected himself. He had inspired this attitude in her. It felt strange to think that he could do that.

Harry heard the outer door of the classroom open. He reflexively moved to grab the Invisibility Cloak to cover Helen, but then he heard Ron yell, "Harry?"

Harry relaxed. "In here," he shouted.

Ron and Hermione walked in. "Ah, here you are," said Ron. Looking at Helen, Ron said, "Hi, I'm Ron, and-"

"And you're Hermione," Helen finished brightly. "Harry told me how you risked your lives for each other."

Ron put his hand on Harry's shoulder in a comradely gesture. "Yes, indeed... it's a very dangerous life, being Harry's friend, but an interesting one."

Helen giggled. "You must be really brave," she said. "How can you do that?"

Ron leaned over conspiratorially. "The trick is, try not to think too much. Once you've decided to do something, do it. If you think about it too much, you may not do

it. One thing I'm very good at is not thinking. My teachers have said so." Helen giggled again, harder this time.

"Are you the one who wrote the letter?" asked Hermione kindly. Helen nodded. "Well, that was very brave of you," Hermione continued.

"We're going to fight Malfoy," Helen said proudly. "Me and the other first years, and some second years, we're not going to let him tell us what to do."

"That's wonderful," Hermione said. "But it's not going to be easy, though. Malfoy's nasty and mean."

"I know," said Helen defiantly. "Professor Potter told me it wouldn't be easy. Some of us could get cursed or bullied. But if we stick together, we can do it."

"If the others are as brave as you, I'm sure you can." She turned to Harry. "Harry, we wanted to let you know the latest. The information goes from older Slytherins to younger Slytherins to younger Gryffindors to us, so it could be garbled, but they're saying that Malfoy thinks you're bluffing, or that you can't make it stick. He's apparently putting full pressure on the fifth years to skive off tomorrow."

"Yes," Harry said triumphantly. "I sure hope that's right."

"You want them to get out of your classes?" Helen asked, confused.

"No, not really," Harry said, "but Malfoy could get into big trouble for this. He thinks he can get away with it, that he can lie about it. I think he's wrong. That's one way your letter helped. You told us about him pressuring you to eat the candies. Since you put it down on parchment, and teachers have seen it, if Malfoy does it now, he can get into bigger trouble. It can't be used as real evidence, because then everyone would know that you wrote it. But it's still helpful."

"If you need it to get Malfoy in more trouble, you can use it, you can say who wrote it," Helen said, looking very determined. Ron and Hermione raised their eyebrows.

"But then he'd single you out for abuse, Helen. Your life would get even more difficult," Harry pointed out.

"Like Voldemort singles you out, and your life is difficult?"

Harry sighed, then gave her a very serious look. "Helen, I've suffered a lot. It's really hard, being the one who gets singled out. I just want to be sure you understand that."

"I understand," she said quietly.

"Okay. I still won't use it unless I have to, but if I think it'll do any good, I will. Now, we should get you out of here. We'll have to use the cloak again, walk around until we find someplace where there's no one around."

"It won't be that hard, Harry. I thought to bring this." Ron pulled out the Marauders' Map from his robes.

"Nice one, Ron, good idea," said Harry. "Let's have a look, then."

Ron set the map on the table. Helen moved closer and peered at it. It took her a minute to figure out what it was and what it did. When she did, she let out a gasp. "Wow... this is so amazing..."

"Look at this!" said Hermione indignantly. "Parkinson is still out there in the hall! She was there when we came in."

"She was around here when we came in, too," said Harry. "She's obviously on a kind of patrol, making sure no Slytherins come talk to me."

"I'm almost surprised they'd bother," Ron said. "Why should they care what first years do?"

"The fact that they care, Ron, shows how worried Malfoy is," explained Hermione. "He wants to control Slytherin, and the first years have become a threat to that control. He wants to intimidate them. But it's good, in a way, Helen. It means he's worried." Helen nodded with satisfaction.

"It's too bad you can't use a map like this to find Voldemort," Helen mused.

"Are there any other Slytherins in places where you're likely to be, Harry?" asked Ron, who was not close enough to see the map well.

"Let's see... yeah, Nott seems to be hanging around the corridor leading to Gryffindor Tower, no reason for him to be there. I can't think of too many other places that I'd be especially likely to be found. Okay, we'll just have to slip by Parkinson again. It looks like if we go this way," Harry said, pointing to the map, "there's no one here, and we can take off the cloak and you can head straight toward the Great Hall entrance. Okay?" he asked Helen.

"Okay."

"All right. Ron and Hermione, you go past Parkinson, and Helen and I'll go the other way. I'll meet you back in Gryffindor Tower." He stood, grabbed the cloak, and gestured Helen to stand next to him.

As she did, she looked up at him with appreciation. "Professor Potter... thank you, for using this to come get me, for talking to me, for helping us."

"It's no problem," he assured her. I just hope everything goes all right, he added to himself.

At 4:30 the next morning, Gryffindor Tower was dark, all its inhabitants asleep. In the sixth year boys' dormitory, Harry was asleep, dreaming he was on his broom. Suddenly the scene changed; he was standing in a graveyard. He recognized it as the graveyard in which Voldemort had come back. The scar on his forehead started prickling. Harry took out his wand, alert, carefully looking around. He knew what he would find here.

Voldemort appeared in front of him, out of nowhere. He looked Harry up and down. Again, Harry felt frozen, unable to move. He saw Voldemort's eyes linger on him, his expression reminding Harry of a cat playing with a mouse before killing it.

"So, Potter... or should I say, Professor Potter... we meet again. It has not been often enough; I think I should drop in on you more often. We really should get to know each other."

Harry found that, surprisingly, he could speak. "I don't need to get to know you," he said loudly. "You're pure evil, that's all I need to know."

"Really, Potter, such disrespect... I will be seeing you more, anyway, whether you like it or not. Your feeble defenses are not enough to keep me out of your mind. I simply have not chosen to venture here."

"And why now?" Harry asked, but he thought he knew the answer.

"To punish you for your disrespect," sneered Voldemort, looking as if he were looking at a bug. "Bad enough that you dare to utter my name. But now you encourage your students to do so. You mock me by giving them school points for doing so. You will pay for that, Potter. You will stop doing this, now."

Harry laughed. "I'll do no such thing," he sneered back. "You can kill me, you can torture me, but you'll never make me do what you want. We'll fight you, and we'll win."

Voldemort looked smug. "What is the point of winning, Potter, when you are dead? Or when you would rather be?"

Harry was suddenly surrounded, practically unable to breathe, it the grip of evil. The world was shut out, only evil existed. Harry felt despair. 'But I still exist,' he thought. 'I'm still here.' Fighting despair, he remembered what he had to do. He summoned an image of himself hugging Hermione in his office, her saying she loved him. He saw Ginny, with admiration in her eyes, reach up and kiss him. He saw Ron put a hand on his shoulder, in his office yesterday. They love me, he thought. And I love them. I have to get through this, for them. He focused on them, on his love for them. In less than a second he started breathing easier. He felt the evil recede. He was himself again.

"You disgust me, Potter," spat Voldemort. "You sicken me. You parade your weakness as if it were a strength."

"It is a strength!" Harry shouted, exultant, taunting. "It drove you from my mind. You can't tolerate it. That's your weakness!"

"Really? Let your friends protect you from this, Potter. Crucio!"

Harry screamed as loud as he could as the familiar pain of the Cruciatus Curse absorbed him, lancing into him at every point of his body, inside and out. He wanted to think, but he couldn't; all he could do was scream. He felt himself rocking back and

forth, and then he felt a pressure against his shoulders. He continued screaming, as he vaguely heard a voice shouting, "Harry!" He was able to open his eyes.

He stopped screaming. He was sitting on his bed, Ron holding him by his shoulders, looking stricken. Neville, Seamus, and Dean were standing next to his bed, ashen. Harry gasped for breath, feeling as if he'd run five kilometers. He grasped Ron's shoulders, suddenly needing human contact. "Voldemort," he breathed. "Cruciatu..." he gasped for breath again.

Neville went white. "I'm getting McGonagall," he shouted, and ran off.

Harry slowly recovered his breath, still holding onto Ron. "Thanks..."

Ron still looked stricken. "I had a real hard time waking you up... I shook you, shoved you, but nothing. I was scared."

"When you're in that much pain, being shaken or shoved is not much feeling by comparison," Harry pointed out. "But you did it. I wonder how long I would have been screaming otherwise."

"I'd rather not think about that," Ron said fearfully.

"Tell me about it," Harry agreed, finally letting go of Ron's shoulders.

They were silent for a moment, and McGonagall came rushing in, Neville close behind. She sat down on the bed next to him and felt his forehead.

"Was this a vision, like last year?" she asked.

"No, it was just him, in that graveyard where he came back... he talked to me, taunted me... he's angry that I've been encouraging students to say his name, told me to stop... tried to possess me... then the Curse, and Ron was able to wake me up."

McGonagall looked near tears, deeply upset. She stood, took out her wand, and whirled in a familiar way. "Fawkes," she said softly. A second later, Fawkes burst into view. All the boys except Harry gasped. To the others, McGonagall said, "You four should try to get back to sleep. I assure you that Harry will be cared for." She helped Harry out of bed. "Put your arm around my shoulder, Harry," she said, putting hers around his waist. He felt he had barely enough strength to do it, but he did. She gripped him to make sure of her hold on him, then grasped Fawkes's tail.

"Dumbledore's quarters," she said, and the phoenix was gone.

The living room of Dumbledore's quarters burst into view. Fawkes let them down, and McGonagall laid Harry out on Dumbledore's sofa. He heard her knock on the door of Dumbledore's bedroom. A few seconds later, Dumbledore opened the door. He took in McGonagall, and Harry on the sofa, and obviously knew at once what had happened. He strode over and sat in a chair near the sofa. "Are you able to tell us about it, Harry?"

Harry nodded. "But... it might be better to have Professor Snape here, while it's still fresh... maybe he..."

Dumbledore interrupted him by putting up his hand. He looked at Harry in slight surprise and nodded. "Yes, that would be better. I just did not know if you would be disturbed by further company."

Fawkes disappeared again and returned in about ten seconds, carrying a somewhat disheveled Severus Snape. Snape took in the scene in a second. "Another vision?" he asked Dumbledore.

"No, a dream. He interacted with Voldemort, not from Voldemort's perspective," answered McGonagall.

"Harry, did you do your Occlumency exercises before bed last night?" asked Dumbledore gently. Harry nodded. "The same way as usual?" Harry nodded again. The three teachers exchanged significant looks. Snape and McGonagall sat down near the sofa. Dumbledore looked at Harry with compassion and said, "Please tell us what happened, Harry, in as much detail as you can recall." One of Harry's hands was near Dumbledore, who took it and held it. It made Harry feel a bit better, as holding Ron's shoulders had.

Harry told them the dream, being careful to omit nothing. When he finished, they all looked pensive, with Dumbledore and McGonagall distraught at what Harry had gone through. Snape appeared to be his usual calculating self.

"Professor Potter," said Snape, "you may find this difficult to accept at the moment, but there are elements of this which may work to our advantage."

Harry nodded, surprising the others. "I thought that might be the case," he said. "I think I even thought it in the dream. It's not like last year, when he was doing it for a specific purpose. Here, he's just doing it because he's angry, he wants to teach me a lesson. That's got to be good for us. That's why I asked Professor Dumbledore to call you, Professor Snape. I thought you might have some insight. Sorry to wake you."

Snape looked to Dumbledore, who nodded. "I was going to tell you in the morning."

Snape looked at Harry. "I would rather have useful information about the Dark Lord than a few extra hours' sleep, Professor. You acted correctly. And you are correct about why it is to our advantage. Acting from emotion is usually disadvantageous; the Dark Lord knows this. I am surprised that he has done this, for this purpose."

"But you warned me. You mentioned 'unintended consequences.' Professor Dumbledore told me, I assume from you, that this might happen."

"I thought it could happen," Snape admitted, "but I thought the probability was low, that the Dark Lord would not act out of emotion. It is not like him."

"Maybe it's not purely out of emotion," Harry suggested. "Maybe he truly fears what might happen if what I'm doing catches on. I mean," he continued, warming to his idea, "he loves that people fear his name, even his followers won't say it. He feeds on fear. If I get the students saying his name without fear, it could spread to the rest of wizarding society, and it would not only be to his disadvantage, but it would damage his status. He would lose that satisfaction he gets from people fearing his name. Maybe he considers it very important to stop this here and now."

The others raised their eyebrows and exchanged looks. Dumbledore gave Harry's hand a squeeze. "It appears that you have at least as much insight as I, Professor," Snape told Harry, surprising Harry greatly. "I find your conjecture to be reasonably likely to be accurate. I should have thought of it myself."

Harry almost smiled. "Well, you didn't get much sleep." Snape raised an eyebrow; Dumbledore and McGonagall chuckled.

"It's good to see that you have not lost your sense of humor, Harry," said Dumbledore, giving Harry's hand another squeeze, then releasing it. "I think you could use a nice cup of hot chocolate; I think I will make one for all of us." He walked over to a counter.

"Harry," McGonagall said, "perhaps it would be better if you were to temporarily forego—"

"Absolutely not," he cut in, looking at her, eyes ablaze. "No way. That would be a sign of weakness."

Snape surprised Harry again. "The professor is correct," he said, causing McGonagall's eyebrows to rise. "The Dark Lord would take it exactly that way. I would not have advised joining this particular battle, Professor Potter, but now that you have, to do anything but follow it through to its end would indeed be a sign of grave weakness. It appears obvious that you are ready, even eager, to join it."

"I'm not eager to wake up in the middle of every night being tortured, for sure," Harry said. "But I know I can't back off of this. Not only because it's a sign of weakness, but because what I'm doing is right."

"The Dark Lord will expect this. He knows perfectly well of your... determination and courage," said Snape reluctantly. "He knows you will not give in, and he will almost certainly be there again tomorrow night. Measures must be taken to prepare."

"Quite so," agreed Dumbledore, who returned, distributing cups of hot chocolate to everyone. Harry sat upright so he could drink his. He saw to his pleasure that his had marshmallows in it. He looked at Dumbledore, who winked.

"Which makes me wonder, what measures are those, and also, I did practice the Occlumency last night. How did he get in anyway? Is there anything more I can do?"

"Harry, Sirius told me once that you told him that you learned the Summoning Charm because you were going to face a dragon in twenty-four hours," recalled Dumbledore. "This may be a similar type of situation. Now, we do have an advantage here. Despite his protestations in your dream, your Occlumency skills are not 'feeble,' and it must have cost him some effort to break into your mind. That is something we may be able to exploit. In any case, I am confident that you will be able to repel him eventually; your skills will improve with practice, and of necessity. The only question is how much stress and loss of sleep you will suffer until then. You could succeed in repelling him tomorrow, or it could take a week or more. There is no way to know."

"Well, this is a battle I'm not going to lose," Harry said. "He's not going to beat me in my own mind. Eventually, he won't be able to get in." He paused. "Is there anything I can do while in the dream itself to fight him?"

"We cannot really know that, Harry," Dumbledore said. "There is no information to go on."

"I would recommend, Professor," said Snape, "that you try things. Use your intuition, as the headmaster is fond of advising. Use your imagination. Nothing you can try can make your situation worse, and it could possibly help. He cannot kill you, he cannot harm you physically."

Harry nodded. "Okay, I'll try that. If I can, that is. This time, it felt like he had me immobilized, like at the Department of Mysteries. But I was able to talk in the dream, and I wasn't then. So maybe I just thought I was immobilized. I'll try to move, and do other stuff next time, if he gets in. I like the idea that I can fight him without the possibility of getting killed."

"Yes, you can only be tortured. What a relief that must be," said McGonagall dryly, obviously thinking that Harry had a bit too much bravado.

"Who knows, maybe I can even avoid being tortured," said Harry stubbornly. "Maybe I only think he can, and so I feel it. Maybe if I step aside, or do something else, it won't happen. Maybe Professor Snape was right."

"It was only a conjecture, Professor Potter; I suggest you not get carried away by the idea."

"Well, I believe that there is not much else we can do here," said Dumbledore. "Harry, I will give you another Occlumency lesson tonight at 10:00, after which you should go to bed."

"Can the others join me?" Harry quickly asked.

Dumbledore smiled. "Yes, I daresay you could use the emotional support. Now, I suppose you will not be trying to get more sleep?"

Harry shook his head. "It's only two hours until I'd usually get up, anyway."

"Well, I was thinking... it seems nice outside, and the sun is starting to rise... a good fly might be invigorating. I will join you; it has been too long since I have flown."

Flying sounded good right then; flying with Dumbledore sounded even better. Harry knew that Dumbledore was asking mainly to give Harry support, and he appreciated it greatly. Harry quickly agreed, and Summoned his broom. Snape and McGonagall said their goodbyes and departed.

Harry and Dumbledore walked out onto the Quidditch pitch, brooms in hand. Dumbledore had taken one of the Slytherin Quidditch team's Nimbus 2001s, pointing out to Harry that while they were provided by Lucius Malfoy, they were school property under the care of the head of Slytherin House. "I believe that Professor Snape will not mind me using it for a while," smiled Dumbledore.

Harry laughed. "I suppose not," he agreed. Malfoy would mind, but too bad, Harry thought. They kicked off the ground, and went up into the air. Harry did indeed feel invigorated, the wind whipping through his hair, the cool air giving him energy. He flew joyously for about five minutes, Dumbledore at his side. Harry couldn't tell who was leading or following, he just knew it felt good.

Harry looked down and happened to see a solitary figure running out onto the pitch. Harry shouted to Dumbledore, and they both descended. It was Ron, holding his Cleansweep.

"Why are you still up?" asked Harry.

"Are you kidding? Do you think we could go back to sleep? 'Right, Voldemort's just attacked my mate, I think I'll have a nice lie down.' Really, Harry, you can be a bit thick sometimes." Dumbledore chuckled.

"How did you know I was out here?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "I'll put it down to the lack of sleep, but you'd better get it together for your classes... a Firebolt climbing out of your trunk and zooming through the portrait hole is kind of hard to miss." Dumbledore was still smiling broadly.

"Okay, I get it... so I take it you'd like to join us?"

"C'mon... how could I turn down the chance to tell my grandkids that I once flew with Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore?"

Harry smiled. "With any luck, I'll be there to tell them how you made fun of me before we flew."

"It's a deal," Ron agreed. "Now, let's go."

As they kicked off, Dumbledore said, "I was going to show Harry some moves from my Quidditch days. I will be interested to see what you think, Ron."

Ron gaped. "You played Quidditch?"

"Yes, I was primarily a Seeker, but I have experience at all positions. Follow me, if you would..."

They flew for over an hour, sometimes doing moves and sometimes just flying for the fun of it. Dumbledore finally suggested that they set down, and on the way down, Harry noticed a small group watching near the Quidditch field. Dumbledore was saying, "I should really do this more often. As one ages, one can forget to indulge in the simple pleasures of life. Or, as the Muggles say, stop to smell the roses once in a while."

Harry asked Ron about the group that they were now walking toward.

"Oh, those are Gryffindor first year boys. They heard you scream, and they came running in just after McGonagall left with you. Then they spent the next fifteen minutes asking me questions about what had happened, your scar, your connection to Voldemort, everything. I think they had pretty much gotten it when your broom flew out. They were pretty impressed by that, too."

"If Professor McGonagall had found you, Ron, she would have reprimanded you for not sending them back to their beds," Dumbledore pointed out as they set down.

"I know, I just didn't have the heart to send them back right away," Ron admitted. "They were so worried about Harry. It would've seemed cruel."

"I understand. It is not often that I approve of a school prefect breaking the rules, but this is one of those times." Ron grinned.

The first years now came running up to them, their faces in awe as they saw who was with Ron and Harry. "Professor Dumbledore!" three said in unison.

"Hello, all," Dumbledore greeted them. "You will be glad to know that Professor Potter is now fine."

"Why were you flying?" asked one.

"Professor Dumbledore was... helping me take my mind off things." Harry looked at Dumbledore with affection. "Thank you, sir."

"Did he hurt you badly, sir?" asked David.

"You mean, Voldemort?" asked Harry pointedly.

The Gryffindors gaped at each other. "But sir, Ron said that he did it because he was mad at you for saying the name!"

"Yes, David, and the fact that he did it is proof that I was doing the right thing, and should continue doing it. Doesn't it make sense that if Voldemort is angry at what you're doing, it's a good thing to be doing?"

"Yes, sir, but.. we heard your scream through a thick wall! Aren't you afraid he's going to do it again?"

"Oh, he's going to do it again, that's for sure," Harry agreed. "And he's going to keep doing it. That's why I have to fight him. Now, the Cruciatus Curse is no fun-

"What Professor Potter means to say," Dumbledore interrupted with a slightly reproving glance at Harry, "is that the Cruciatus Curse is the most hideously painful torture known to man, but that he will face it anyway, to defy Voldemort."

The first years gaped at him. Harry said, "Well, yes, those wouldn't have been my exact words, but..."

"You have yet to learn, Harry, that there is a point at which modesty ends and dissembling begins. Please try to keep that in mind."

"Yes, sir... anyway, yes, it's extremely painful. People have lost their minds from having it done to them for too long," he continued, to the still-awed first years. "But I have to keep doing this; I have to get people to say the name, so they won't be scared of it. And I'm not putting anyone else at risk; the only one he can get to like this is me. But I'm going to stop him. I'm going to beat him."

"But how can you beat him, sir?" asked David, as Harry saw Hermione and Ginny come flying out the castle entrance, running toward him at full speed.

"By keeping him out of my mind," Harry answered. "With practice, I can do it. Professor Dumbledore's going to help me."

"Better brace for impact, Harry," Ron advised, as Hermione and Ginny got nearer. Hermione was closer. "Oh, Harry!" she cried as she plowed into him, nearly knocking him over. She repeated it as she hugged him tightly, then stepped aside to let Ginny have a turn. He hugged both back, gently saying, "I'm okay, it's all right."

"But you're going to keep doing it, aren't you? You are, I know you," asked Hermione anxiously.

"I have to, Hermione. You know that. I can't give in to him."

"I know, I know, I just hate it. I just wish I could do it for you."

"I wouldn't let you. You know that, too," Harry pointed out.

"Well, you know we'll do anything we can to help you," said Ginny, still holding onto Harry's left arm.

"I know," he said, meeting her eyes as they walked. "Just knowing that is helpful, believe me."

"Professor Potter could not be more correct," said Dumbledore. Looking at Ron, Ginny, and Hermione. "Talented and resourceful as he is, he could not have accomplished what he has without your friendship and support." He glanced at the sky, apparently gauging the time by the sun's location. "Well, I must be off. I will see you three in class later, and all of you in my quarters at 10:00. Harry, if you need me

for any reason, I will be available. Goodbye for now." He strode off to the castle entrance.

"What are we doing at ten?" asked Ginny.

"An Occlumency session. He said we'll have them every night until Voldemort can't get in anymore. I'm going to beat this."

The five Gryffindor first years started running ahead, no doubt to start spreading the word. "Hey! Wait a minute!" Harry shouted at them. Startled, they came skidding to a stop.

"Listen to me. You can't stop saying his name. I know you might want to stop, to help me, but it won't help me. If we stop, then he wins. If you want to support me, keep saying his name. Do you understand?" They nodded.

"Eric. What's his name?"

"Voldemort."

"David?"

"Voldemort," David said firmly.

"Good. Now, go ahead." They took off running.

Hermione looked at him. "You know, Harry, you may be a teacher, but right then you were a general, in a war. You were giving the troops their instructions, like in those Muggle movies."

Harry nodded. "And we really are in a war, just a different kind." They walked into the castle.

Chapter 10

Fawkes

Harry walked into Gryffindor Tower to get dressed, then went back to the Great Hall, where breakfast was underway. Harry saw a large group of first years at the Gryffindor table; he realized it was all the Gryffindor and Slytherin first years. He knew that the five male Gryffindors were busily spreading the word.

He walked to his usual spot, where he saw Ernie Macmillan and Justin Finch-Fletchley talking to Ron and Hermione. To his surprise, on seeing him, Ernie and Justin both shook his hand and patted him on the shoulder; Ernie a bit awkwardly, Justin more naturally. Harry was touched by their support, and thanked them.

"I have to say, Harry," said Justin, "if this is part of what being Harry Potter is all about, then you're welcome to it."

"Is it really worth this, Harry?" asked Ernie. "Is it really worth suffering like this?"

"It absolutely is, Ernie," Harry said vigorously. "We have to stop being afraid to say his damn name. Look what he's doing, he's really feeling threatened. If I have to suffer a bit to be a poster boy for saying the word 'Voldemort,' then I will. It's worth whatever happens, even if only on principle."

"Poster boy?" Ernie asked.

"Muggle expression, I'll explain later," replied Justin.

"Well, the Sorting Hat sure did its job when it put you in Gryffindor, Harry. You're as brave as anyone I've ever met," said Ernie solemnly.

"Thank you, Ernie, I really appreciate that."

"You know, David told me that he said the Hat almost put him in Slytherin," said Justin.

"Really?" Ernie was dumbfounded.

"I pleaded with it not to," confirmed Harry. "Thank God, it listened to me. It said I would do well in Slytherin, but I'd already met Malfoy, and I didn't want to be anywhere near him. A close call."

"I'll say," sympathized Ernie. "Well, you have our support, Harry. If there's anything we can do for you, let us know."

"There is one thing, actually." He gave Justin a knowing look.

Justin got it. "You'd like us to say 'Voldemort.'"

"That's it. Would you like some points for Hufflepuff?"

Justin chuckled. "That's all right, I'm not in your classes. I might as well be, though; my brother won't shut up about you."

Ernie cleared his throat, and said, "Well, I would encourage all the Hufflepuffs to say the name..." he took a deep breath, "Voldemort... but I think our first years are doing it already."

"Thank you, Ernie, and you, Justin, I appreciate the gesture. And Justin... David's a good guy. We're lucky to have him in Gryffindor."

"Thanks," said Justin. They walked back to their table, and Harry sat down.

"That was really good of them," Hermione commented. "They went out of their way to come over here, to be supportive, and they even said 'Voldemort' when they were both uncomfortable doing it."

"You're right, I can use all the support I can get right now," Harry agreed.

Just then, Luna Lovegood walked up; Harry hadn't talked to her yet this term, and was looking forward to saying hello. She walked up to where he was sitting, leaned over, kissed him on the cheek, and walked away without a word.

Harry gaped in surprise in her direction as she walked away; Ron and Hermione giggled and tried not to laugh out loud. Ron got himself under control and said, "Well, who needs words, anyway."

Hermione shrugged. "She got her point across, I'd say."

"Hard to argue with that," Harry agreed.

They were able to eat in peace for a while before the Slytherin first years, apparently now fully briefed by the Gryffindor boys, walked up to Harry, with the five Gryffindor girls behind them.

"Are you all right, Professor?" asked David Septus, anxiously.

"Yes, I'm all right, thanks. Ron woke me up, and I was all right soon after that." He added wryly, "It was the part before I woke up that was the problem."

Andrea Creevey looked at him anxiously. "David said that Professor Dumbledore said that it's a..." She struggled to remember.

"Hideously painful torture," supplied Hedrick.

"Yes... and you're going to face that again, and again, just to keep saying his name? How can you do that?" She was almost pleading.

"How can I not?" he replied. "Nobody seems to really understand this, but-"

"I understand," interrupted Helen Clark. She faced the others. "It's part of what he was telling me yesterday in his office. I told you all this, but it's true for Professor Potter's situation too. Voldemort is trying to stop what Professor Potter is doing. He's trying to hurt Professor Potter to make him stop us saying his name, to make us want to stop saying his name. But even if he hurts one person, or more, we have to keep fighting, because if we don't, Voldemort wins. We just have to keep fighting." The rest fell silent.

Harry was bursting with pride. He looked her in the eyes and said, "You took what I taught you about your situation, understood it, and recognized that it worked for my situation, too. What more could a teacher ask of a student?" She blushed.

Harry glanced around and saw that a lot of people were listening; all the rest of the Gryffindor sixth years, Ginny and most of the fifth years, and various Hufflepuffs, including Justin and Ernie, who were still in hearing range. Harry was glad, he wanted as many people as possible to understand this.

He looked around again, this time to see Draco Malfoy approaching; oddly, without Crabbe or Goyle. The Hall seemed to quiet down. He gave Harry his usual sneer. "So, you've got quite a crowd, Scarhead. Bet you love that."

"That's Professor Scarhead to you, Malfoy." Harry remembered the joke he'd mentioned to Dudley, and thought he had to try it. "Say, Malfoy, where's Moe and Curly?"

Hermione, Justin, Dean, David, all three Creeveys, Eric, and a few scattered others burst out laughing; the rest, including Malfoy, looked confused. Looking at Malfoy's confusion only made some laugh harder; Hermione was holding onto a very bewildered Ron to try to steady herself. Harry enjoyed the scene. Even though only a

minority were laughing, Malfoy was still upset not to know what they were laughing about.

"Anybody who doesn't get it, ask someone who's laughing now, they'll explain it to you later," said Harry helpfully to the others. "Now, did you want something, Malfoy?"

Warming to his topic, Malfoy regained his smugness. "So, you said his name one too many times, and look what happens. Tortured in your sleep, from miles away. You can't get away from the Dark Lord, Potter. Still claim to not be afraid of him?"

"Who, Voldemort?" Malfoy blanched. "Are you talking about Voldemort, Malfoy? Is it Voldemort to whom you're referring? If it's Voldemort you're talking about, Malfoy, then why don't you just say..." Harry intended to stretch out the pause for dramatic effect, but his plan was changed when before he could say the name, ten Gryffindor and ten Slytherin first years shouted, as one, "Voldemort!"

Malfoy practically jumped out of his skin, causing laughter all around. Harry looked at the students and said, "I've never been so proud." Some smiled, some laughed, and some blushed.

"Are you stupid, Potter? You woke up screaming a few hours ago! Have you forgotten that already?"

Harry stood and stared directly at Malfoy. "No, Malfoy, I remember it quite vividly. And it will motivate me to keep saying the name 'Voldemort' for as long as I breathe. I don't give up. I know you can't understand this. If it had happened to you, you'd be crawling around, trying to find out whose boots you could lick to make it stop, to get on their good side. You can't understand any other way to be. That's how you were raised, and for that, I feel sorry for you. But you're wasting my time, so get back over there and enjoy spending time with the people who'll agree with anything you say. It's only there that you can be comfortable." Harry pointedly sat down and took another bite of his food as a way of dismissing Malfoy. Malfoy cast another disgusted look, shook his head, then turned and left. A round of applause went up, which included, Harry noted, some Slytherins.

"See, Malfoy and his crowd, they don't stand up for each other," said Ron. "Where were Crabbe and Goyle, when they could have been standing next to Malfoy looking, you know, big and stupid? Could've really helped him."

"Well, then I couldn't have made the Three Stooges joke," Harry observed.

Hermione burst out laughing again. "Oh, Harry, that was so hysterical! It was the best joke I've ever heard you make! And the best part was, he didn't even understand it!"

"Lot of us didn't either, though," pointed out Ron. "It's a Muggle thing, I assume?"

"Yes, it is," said Hermione. Harry got back to his food as she explained it to Ron and others around them.

Dozens of owls suddenly appeared in the Great Hall. Harry didn't take much notice; this happened every day, and there was almost never anything for him. But today there was; one letter dropped onto the table in front of him, then another, then two more, and more still. By the time the owls had gone, nine letters lay in front of him. Ron and Hermione were wide-eyed.

"Wow, you must be popular," said Helen. "Do you always get this much mail?"

"In fact, almost never," replied Harry. He opened one and started reading. He glanced up at the Slytherins in front of him, looked back at the letter, and looked up again. He opened another letter, read it quickly, then opened a third one and skimmed it. He looked at the Slytherins. "I will read them all later, believe me, but just for now... do they all say more or less the same thing?" Nine Slytherins nodded. "Does she know?" Harry asked. They shook their heads.

"What are you guys talking about?" asked Helen, in confusion and annoyance.

"Helen, last night, when you were telling them about your meeting with me... did you tell them how you were willing to be singled out, to have your name used so we could catch Malfoy, even if it was dangerous for you?" She nodded. "Well," he continued, his voice choking up with pride, "your nine classmates each wrote me a letter, saying much the same things you did, about Malfoy's behavior and about the candies. They did it because it meant that if I used your letter as evidence, it wouldn't be just your letter, it would be all ten of you. They divided the risk among themselves, so it wouldn't only be yours."

Helen was silent for a moment, then tears started trickling down her face. Harry glanced at Hermione, who looked like she might start crying herself. Helen walked toward her classmates, clearly overwhelmed, and started touching people randomly and thanking them between tears. A few girls got out tissues for her. Finally she said, "Thank you all so much... I don't know what to say."

Harry got up and knelt next to the Slytherins. "I'm really, really proud of all of you. I mean that. I know how she feels. They've," motioning toward Ron and Hermione, "done stuff like that for me many times. It's great to know that you have friends, people who'll share the difficulties with you. It's one of the best things about life."

He looked at the clock; it was getting close to when they had to leave for their respective classes. "Look... we don't have much time left, and I wanted to say something, about what I said to Malfoy when he came over here. Everything I said

was the truth, but I don't want you to have a wrong impression. The phrase Professor Dumbledore used, that it's a 'hideously painful torture,' is very accurate, and I'd be lying if I said I'll go to sleep tonight not thinking about what might happen in my sleep. It'll be really bad. My point is, I don't want to make it seem like it's no big deal. I don't want you to ever walk into danger without understanding what you could be getting yourself into. Don't be casual about it, understand it, accept it, and face it. I've done the first three, and the fourth comes later. All I can do is, like Ron said to you," gesturing to Helen, "is not to think too much about it."

Ginny knelt by Harry. "We would do it with him if we could."

Hermione added, "We would do it for him if we could."

Harry looked at them with gratitude, then said to the first years, "But because of this," moving his hair to show his scar, "they can't. Only I can do it."

Hedrick said, "David tried to explain it to us, but there's still a lot we don't understand, about how Voldemort can get to you. I know there's no time now, but..."

Harry nodded. They had become close to him in a very short time; he would give them what time he could. "Ron, what time are the Quidditch tryouts?"

"Six-thirty," answered Ron.

Harry quickly calculated times. "Okay, I have a class until four o'clock. If you want to come to my classroom then, I'll answer questions and explain anything you want. How about that?" They nodded eagerly and thanked him. "Okay, you'd better get going, and so had I. I have a class, too." They moved off.

Ginny started to stand up, but Harry grabbed her wrist. "Ginny, wait... I still have to figure out what to do about the Slytherin fifth years and the Snackboxes. You've been in classes with them. What's your impression of them? What kind of people are they?"

"It's almost hard to say; I haven't really talked much with any of them. None of them seem to have much of a strong personality. All I know for sure is that there are no Malfoys, no one who obviously gets off on power and being mean. I'd be willing to bet that at least some don't like him because he probably treats them badly, since they're younger. I'm sorry I can't tell you more than that."

"That's enough for what I need, thanks. We'd better get going."

By the time they reached the classroom, all the other students were already there. As Ginny took a seat and Harry walked up to the front, applause suddenly broke out. Harry reflexively looked around, as if trying to work out who the applause was for, which generated some laughter. He put his bag down on the desk, and faced them.

"Thanks, but I'm kind of wondering, can someone tell me what that was for?"

There was silence for a moment, and a Slytherin girl with long, dark hair raised her hand. "I'm not sure I can say for everyone, but I think for two things. One, we've never seen anyone talk to Malfoy like that, and I for one loved it." Voices murmured their agreement. "He's done nothing but push us around since the day we got here. Two, I don't know all the details, but I know the basics of what happened last night. I have an uncle who was once subjected to the Cruciatus Curse. He told me how horrible it was, how words can't begin to express the pain involved. Even thinking about it still scares him. So, the idea that you went through that a few hours ago, and you're willing to do it again, just so we can say... V- Voldemort... well, I know Gryffindors are supposed to be brave, but this is beyond bravery, it's like..." She groped for a word, then finally said, "Well, you know what I mean."

He looked at her sincerely. "Thank you, Juliet." He paused. "Was that the first time you ever said Voldemort's name?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, that's twenty points for Slytherin."

Ginny said, "Damn, I should have said his name as soon as we walked into the room. I know you only give the twenty points once."

"Sorry, Ginny, you wouldn't have gotten it anyway. It's only for people who haven't said the name before, and I know you have."

"Well, that hardly seems fair." she pouted.

Harry smiled. "Now, let me take the roll, before I forget." He walked over to the podium and did so. When he got to Colin Creevey's name, he said, "Colin, I taught your sister on Monday. I really like her. She's very spirited."

Colin smiled. "Yes, sir. But Dennis and I like her anyway."

Harry chuckled. "Yes, Colin, I can see how that could be annoying at times." He glanced at Ginny as he said it, recalling that she could be described as spirited too, and that it probably annoyed Ron from time to time. He finished calling the roll.

"If I remember the last names right, two of you Slytherins have brothers or sisters who are first years, is that right?" He saw two heads nod. "Well, you should be proud of them. They're a great group."

A short-haired blonde girl raised her hand. "My brother's told me all about what's happened. I'd really like to help him."

"You can," Harry pointed out. "You can support them, help them out when they need it, help stand up for them. They could use the help of older students. They're brave, but it's hard for them because they're so young."

A dark-haired Slytherin boy at the back named Thomas Dalton raised his hand. "Professor, I think you know, I think the whole school knows, that Malfoy gave us candies from those Skiving Snackboxes and told us to take them to get out of your

class, like a few of the third and fourth years did." Harry nodded. "Well, he jinxed a few of those that didn't, and he made some nasty threats against us if we don't. One thing you learn in Slytherin, sir, is to take Malfoy's threats seriously. I think most of us are afraid not to do what he asked. He's talked to each of us about this, like three times, he's really serious about it."

Harry nodded. "I understand, and I sympathize, I really do. But I do have to give you all detentions if you do, I really have no choice."

"I understand that," said Thomas. "But we also heard that you know he's doing it, and you threatened to give him an hour of detention for every one of us that skives, is that right?" Harry nodded. "So, I was wondering," Thomas continued, "why is Malfoy still pushing us to do this? When he'll get tons of detention?"

"I can't be sure," Harry said, "but I think there's a few reasons. One is that it's me, Harry Potter, who he hates. He's furious that I've been made a teacher, as you saw at the feast, and he really wants to do something to hurt me. Now he's even more furious that the first and second years like me..."

"It's not only them," said Juliet. "I've heard third and fourth years say it too. They just don't say it very loudly."

"I understand. Anyway, so his anger at me is at an all-time high, which is really saying something. He wants to get me really bad. That's why he was gloating about what Voldemort did to me, he loves it." He saw many dark looks, from all students regardless of house. "Secondly, he thinks he can get away with it. I have no firm proof, since it's all things he said, he thinks he can deny it, and since he's a prefect, get away with it. He's used to getting away with whatever he wants, and his hatred of me may be blinding him to the risks he's taking."

"Can he get away with it?" asked Thomas.

"No," answered Harry, deciding at the last second not to equivocate. "The other teachers are going to support me, they approve of the threat I made to Malfoy. He's making a deliberate attempt to undermine a Hogwarts teacher, and they take that seriously. He's made a huge mistake, he just doesn't know it yet."

"So, if we use the Snacks, he gets ten hours of detention, and we get one each?" Harry nodded, as did Thomas. "Seems like a fair trade to me." Everyone laughed

"You understand I can't officially approve of this," Harry pointed out, choosing his words carefully. "If I approve, it becomes all right, and nothing happens to Malfoy. So, I officially disapprove of you using the Snacks. Is everybody clear on that? Now, if you should at some point not feel well," he continued humorously, "you should go down to Madam Pomfrey's, and stay there until the end of the class time." He looked at the Slytherins expectantly.

There was silence for a few seconds. Then, understanding what Harry was waiting for, Thomas exclaimed, "Well, I'm not going to do it now. I don't know about everyone else, but I want to see the lesson. I'll do it with fifteen minutes to go."

Harry made sure no one else intended to take theirs immediately, and proceeded with the lesson. More than the others, he modeled it on what he had done with the D.A., because as fifth years they already knew a lot of the spells he would be emphasizing for personal defense. The lesson focused on Protection and Disarming; Harry told them that he knew they already knew them, but he wanted to be sure they had the fundamentals before moving on.

With fifteen minutes to go, suddenly Thomas developed a nosebleed. "That's a nasty nosebleed you've got there, Thomas. You'd better get down to Madam Pomfrey's." Some students chuckled as Thomas picked up his bags and left; suddenly three students vomited, three fainted, two developed fevers, and there was one more nosebleed. Harry Vanished all the blood and vomit on the floor as the last of the Slytherins left.

"Well, I didn't think teaching was going to be such a messy business," he said. "Let's give them a few minutes to get down there." They continued practicing for a few minutes. Harry then said, "Okay, I think they're all there by now. I have to let Professor Dumbledore know. This shouldn't take long."

He pulled out his wand, and waved it as Dumbledore had shown him. "Fawkes," he said. A second later, Fawkes came bursting into view. There was a gasp; most of the students had never seen Fawkes before. Harry grasped Fawkes's tail and said, "Professor Dumbledore's office." Suddenly, he was there.

"Ah, Harry, I was wondering where you were," said Dumbledore genially. "I gather this means that the Slytherins felt it necessary to use the Snacks to protect themselves from Mr. Malfoy, but their hearts were not in it, since they stayed for most of the lesson?"

"That was my impression, Professor," Harry confirmed.

"Very well, then. I will head over to Madam Pomfrey's; you go ahead back to your class." He headed out the door, Harry said, "the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom," Fawkes took off, and he was back in the classroom.

The remaining ten Gryffindors broke into applause, which Harry understood was for Fawkes, not for him. "Yeah, he's pretty great," Harry agreed.

"I'm amazed that Professor Dumbledore let you use him!" enthused Ginny. "I've never seen a teacher do that before."

"Oh, you mean I was supposed to ask?" Harry joked. "Well, I told him I didn't want to be gone too long, so he let me use him." He noticed that Fawkes had perched on his shoulder; he reached up and stroked him. Fawkes's feathers were amazingly

soft, like silk. Harry had to make himself stop. Turning his head to look at Fawkes, he said, "Fawkes, you can go back to Professor Dumbledore's office." He waited a minute. "It's okay, Fawkes, I'm done. You can go back." Fawkes continued not to move. Harry waited another few seconds, then said, "Or, you could stay here a while longer." Most of the students grinned, amused at his predicament.

They resumed their practice, and Harry called a halt shortly before the bell. "Now, there's just a few minutes left, so why don't we just stop here. You can get an early start to your next class, and I can figure out what to do with Fawkes here."

"No, just keep him there," urged Ginny. "Then in your next class, Luna Lovegood will say, 'Excuse me, Professor, did you know there's a phoenix on your shoulder?' And you should deny it, of course."

Harry smiled. "See you all next week," he said, and headed back to his office. He sat down in his chair; Fawkes hopped onto the desk and regarded Harry, who started petting him. "I'd love to know what this is all about, Fawkes," he said. He thought about traveling back to Dumbledore's office and trying to leave Fawkes there, but he knew that phoenixes were extraordinarily magical creatures, and that in the end, Fawkes would do what he wanted. Harry would just have to wait until he could talk to Dumbledore.

The next class went well, despite the slight distraction of Fawkes' presence; Luna did manage to tell an improbable story that her father once published about a phoenix. The class was good, partly because it had the highest number of D.A. members of any of Harry's classes. After the class, Harry headed off to lunch. As was usual when he taught, Ron and Hermione were there first.

"Cool, Harry! You stole Fawkes!" joked Ron. "You're not hiding him very well, though. Kind of conspicuous."

Harry explained what had happened. "I just have to wait until I can talk to Professor Dumbledore, I don't know what's going on."

"Phoenixes are really smart, Harry," said Hermione. "I'm sure he has a very good reason for doing this, you just don't know what it is."

"Well, I'll be interested to find out. I attract enough attention without having a phoenix on my shoulder." Harry paused and looked up. "It's kind of nice having him around, though. He's nice, and his feathers are really soft."

Hermione said, "We want to know the whole story of the dream, of course, but we know you're going to tell your first years at 4:00. We thought we'd just join you then, so you don't have to do it again." Harry said that sounded fine.

The rest of lunch was uneventful. Parvati and Lavender came over to admire Fawkes, as did Hannah Abbott and a few others. At about 12:40, as Harry was considering heading over to the staff room, a golden dog entered the Great Hall and

headed for Harry. He jumped up into Harry's lap, and buried his head in Harry's chest. Hermione smiled radiantly; Ron looked curious. "Well, I don't want to keep him waiting," Harry said, and got up. With a phoenix on his shoulder, following a golden dog, Harry headed to Dumbledore's office.

Dumbledore's office door was open. "Harry, thank you for coming. Ah, there he is. I was wondering where Fawkes had got off to."

"Couldn't you have called him, Professor?"

"I prefer not to unless there is a real need. I don't like to disturb him."

"Sorry, Professor. When I got back to my class, I told him he could go ahead back to your office, but he just stayed. I was wondering what to do, but I just decided it was better not to argue with him, and wait to talk to you."

"A wise move, Harry. Phoenixes tend to know what is best. If one does a certain thing, he is bound to have a good reason."

"So, why has he done this, sir? Why does he stay with me?"

"Fawkes has decided to care for you for the duration of your crisis. He will stay with you, almost twenty-four hours a day, until the danger from Voldemort has passed."

Harry knew enough about phoenixes to know that this was a very good thing. "That's great, sir. Is this something you told him to do?"

"One does not 'tell' a phoenix to do something, Harry, one requests it," Dumbledore explained. "One does not 'own' a phoenix, one cares for it, or serves as a companion to it. I could have requested that Fawkes do this, but it would have been highly presumptuous of me. It would be a bit like telling a person whom they should love."

Harry didn't see how the analogy worked. "I don't understand, sir."

"Fawkes will stay with you and care for you, Harry. He will sing to help you to sleep, and throughout your sleep, to assist you in your struggle with Voldemort. This is not a task a phoenix undertakes lightly. It is a serious commitment, and phoenixes are very discriminating creatures. They will not do this for just anyone, to put it mildly. I am pleased that Fawkes has chosen to do this for you, but as I said, it is such a serious thing that it was not for me to suggest."

"Is this going to hurt Fawkes? Will he suffer like I will?"

Dumbledore smiled proudly. "You are very worthy of his attention, Harry. You are undergoing a terrible ordeal, but you are still worried about Fawkes, as you would for anyone following you into a dangerous situation. To answer your question, he will suffer no discomfort. He will mainly have to... concentrate harder than usual, I believe would be the human equivalent. To put it another way, he is joining you in your

fight. We fellow humans can give you emotional and moral support; Fawkes can do more. He will be of great help to you."

Harry had no difficulty believing that. He turned his head to look at Fawkes. "Thank you, Fawkes," he said, petting him. "This means a lot to me."

"It means something else that is not critical for you to know just now, but I will tell you anyway, because you would want to know. As I said, phoenixes are highly discriminating. What he is doing with you is a form of bonding, and phoenixes only bond with those they feel would be good custodians or companions. What I am saying, Harry, is that by doing this, Fawkes is indicating that he has selected you to be his next companion, after I am gone."

Harry felt stunned. His first reaction was that he didn't want to contemplate Albus Dumbledore being gone. He had come to depend on Dumbledore, especially recently. He hoped he would not be inheriting Fawkes for a very long time. His next reaction was to feel honored. A phoenix chose him as a companion? It was a lot to get used to. He voiced his first reaction.

"Sir, I really don't want to think about you being gone."

Dumbledore nodded. "No, we do not wish to think of that about those for whom we care, and I am honored that you feel that way. But we cannot ignore facts, either. I do not mean I will die tomorrow, or next month. But I am quite old, already a distance past normal life expectancy. Fawkes knows this. I have for some time been urging him to think about the future, and he has chosen you. After this crisis is over, he will still be my companion, but he will also be yours. It is a kind of changing of the guard, so to speak. He will spend time with each of us as he feels is appropriate, or where he feels the need is greater. It is normal that the phoenix spends more of this interim time in the presence of the older custodian, but it can vary from phoenix to phoenix."

"Wow... sir... I'm really stunned. I mean, this is very serious. This is a very big thing. I'm just really honored."

"It is indeed an honor, Harry. I am glad you recognize that. The worldwide phoenix population is not high, and not all phoenixes choose to companion humans. The percentage of those that do is estimated to be less than a quarter of all phoenixes."

Harry still couldn't quite believe it. He didn't know that much about phoenixes beyond what he knew about Fawkes, but it had always been his impression that only people of great stature, like Dumbledore, could attract them. "Why did he choose me, Professor? It can't be just because of this crisis, since he's going to be with me for the rest of my life, right? Why me and not someone else?"

"Were I to ask him, he would not be able to answer with any specifics. Phoenixes have a keen sense of intuition; they can know the best thing to do without

knowing what we would refer to as the 'reason'. He simply feels, or knows, that you will make a good companion. It may help you to understand the nature of a phoenix's bond with its companion. Once the bond is well established, you and he will be able to communicate in certain ways without words; there will be a sort of mental link. Phoenixes are very calm; that will affect you on a consistent basis, and help you achieve the emotional control that we have discussed. The communication is two-way; he will feel what you feel to a great extent. This is why phoenixes are so selective; were a phoenix to bond with a chronically depressed or emotionally unstable person, the phoenix would suffer along with the companion. Phoenixes are very sensitive to anger and hatred; it affects them very strongly and negatively."

Amazed, Harry immediately wondered whether Fawkes had made a good choice. "But, sir, isn't he going to be in trouble, then? I mean, look at how I was last year, I was angry or upset a lot of the time. I seem like the least likely person for a phoenix to choose."

Dumbledore gave Harry a small smile, suggesting that he knew more than Harry did. "It is not your past that attracts Fawkes, it is your future. He would not do this unless he felt that you were, or would soon be, the kind of person that a phoenix desires as a companion."

Harry almost asked Dumbledore to repeat what he had said, so surprised was he. "Wow... I don't really know what to say to that. I... I guess I'll just try extra hard to make sure that happens. I don't want him to have to suffer."

Dumbledore nodded as if he had known Harry would say that. "That you feel that way is part of the reason he chose you. I do not want to say that phoenixes are never wrong, but it happens so rarely that one might just as well say so."

Harry exhaled, still stunned. "This is so incredible. I mean... I don't know, it's just been an amazing day."

"If today has been, or will be, an extraordinary day, it is because of your crisis," said Dumbledore. "The regard, affection, assistance, love, and support will flow from those who know you, in great quantities. They hope to fortify you in your time of need. You are on the front lines in a battle. They cannot be with you physically, but they want you to know they are there with you in spirit."

Harry felt overwhelmed. "I guess I see what you mean, everyone's been so concerned. Justin and Ernie came over, a few other people... and all of my first-year Slytherins... they still felt under threat from Malfoy, but after they found out what happened to me, they came over anyway, they didn't care. Oh, by the way, did you hear what they did?" Harry told him about the nine letters he got, the context of the situation, and how proud he was.

"Indeed you should be proud, Harry, because they were doing what you taught them, and showing real courage and solidarity. I firmly believe that they followed your example as well as your instruction. And that is why they braved Mr. Malfoy's wrath and visited you."

Shaking his head in amazement, Harry said, "I wouldn't have thought I could feel this close to them after only a short time."

"Your feelings were strongly engaged, as you said, because they were suffering for supporting you. You could identify with their struggle, similar in concept to your own, but you could not take direct action on their behalf. All that is bound to create a bond of closeness. The relationship you build with these students will last a lifetime."

Harry nodded; he felt Dumbledore was well equipped to understand such things. But the mention of Malfoy's name spurred another thought. "Oh, sir... how did it go, with the fifth-year Slytherins in Madam Pomfrey's?"

"You will not be surprised to hear that they truthfully reported that they felt coerced into evading your classes by using the Snacks, and that they would rather not have done so. There was also an amount of unprompted testimony of a history of abuse by Mr. Malfoy; they did seem to have a lot to get off their chests. I am satisfied that they are blameless, and if you wish to rescind their detentions for that reason, I would support that. As for Mr. Malfoy, I will interview him tonight to determine an appropriate disciplinary action. His Head of House will be present, as will you, as this involves your class."

"Do you mean you're going to decide if my punishment will be enforced?"

"Oh, no, that is already done. Teachers have great discretion in such matters. In addition, even if he had not coerced them, as a prefect, he shared responsibility for their actions, which you pointed out to him. No, the meeting tonight will be to determine whether, and what type of, further sanctions are warranted. What they may be, and how severe, will depend on Mr. Malfoy's testimony."

In other words, if he lies, he'll be in big trouble, thought Harry. Harry doubted that Malfoy knew that Dumbledore was a Legilimens, and so would lie ever more earnestly, not knowing he was digging a hole deeper and deeper. Harry found himself looking forward to it, but then looked at Dumbledore, and realized that such reactions were not something to be proud of.

"I understand, sir. What time will this meeting be? I have Quidditch at 6:30, and Occlumency with you at 10:00, so my evening's a little tight."

Dumbledore smiled. "Yes, it is a busy day. Let us make it 9:15, then. That should allow more than enough time."

Harry thought of leaving, and tried to decide whether there was anything else he should ask. "Professor, I realize that becoming a companion of Fawkes's is really important. Is there anything else that I should know about phoenixes that I don't know, especially thinking of the next few days?"

"Only that, in addition to their song having magical powers, their mere presence has a calming effect, as I referred to earlier. You may already have observed this; it will help you get to sleep tonight, and stay calm and focused for as long as this crisis lasts. He will also leave for short periods of time, mainly to get food. You do not need to feed or water him; he takes care of that himself. All you have to do is treat him with respect and appreciate his presence."

"I can do that without trying," Harry assured Dumbledore. Turning to Fawkes, he added, "Thank you again, Fawkes. I'm honored that you chose me." A thought about why he might have been chosen came into Harry's head. "Professor... does Fawkes know that I'm the Boy Who Lived? Do phoenixes think in those terms?"

"No, Harry, they do not. They know emotions, and words to describe people and motions, and as I mentioned, are highly intuitive. For example, Fawkes knew when to come to you in the Chamber of Secrets without being specifically told. He did not 'know' the situation exactly as we did, but he knew what to do. In any case, Fawkes would not concern himself with such matters as abstract as your status. He chose you because he can see inside you, after a fashion. We often radiate our feelings from our face, especially our eyes. We always radiate our emotions, in ways phoenixes are sensitive to. A phoenix can tell exactly what kind of person you are simply by being around you. That is another part of how you were chosen."

Harry found that hard to accept; he had never thought of himself as exceptional, except for managing to get into trouble. He wondered what it was that Fawkes saw that he didn't. "I'm still pretty amazed, sir... well, I suppose for now I shouldn't think about it too much, just enjoy his company."

"Yes, that is an excellent idea, Harry."

Harry thanked Dumbledore, left, then went to the Great Hall to meet Ron and Hermione before their lesson with Dumbledore. They were still at the table, but now studying, not eating. Harry sat down, Fawkes becoming a permanent fixture on his shoulder.

Without preamble, he explained the situation with Fawkes. Ron and Hermione gaped. "Oh, my God, Harry!" Hermione squeaked. "That's amazing! I've read that only one in ten thousand wizards ever have a phoenix in their lives. That's wonderful!"

"You're going to have to learn all about them now," Ron pointed out. "I'm sure Hermione can point you to a good book or two." Hermione made a face at him. Then,

he said, "Seriously, mate, that's great. Can't think of anybody who could use it more than you."

"Well, it'll be nice to go to sleep to phoenix song," Harry agreed.

"Yeah, that'll be cool, I'll get to hear it too." Ron said enthusiastically.

"That reminds me, should I even be sleeping in our dormitory, until this thing is over? I mean, I'm just going to wake you up again."

"Yeah, it's so inconvenient to wake up early because your friend is being tortured, better to throw you out instead," Ron mocked him. "I mean, come on."

"Dean and Seamus might not feel that way," Harry pointed out.

"Dean and Seamus should stay someplace else, then," Ron asserted. "I'm going to go talk to them, see what they think." He got up and headed down the table.

Ron was gone for ten minutes, coming back just before they had to leave for Dumbledore's class. "Okay, I've fixed it," he said, sitting down. "I talked to Dean and Seamus, then McGonagall. Dean and Seamus will stay in guest quarters until this is over. Hermione, if you want to, you and Ginny will be sleeping in their beds." Ron happily took in Harry and Hermione's amazed looks; he seldom got to surprise them.

"Girls sleeping in a boys' dormitory? How did you get her to agree to that?" asked Hermione, very impressed.

"I told her that it would be very helpful to Harry to have his closest friends nearby," Ron explained. "I think the fact that we're prefects helps. When she said, 'Mr. Weasley, there is a reason that girls' and boys' dormitories are separate,' I got all indignant... 'Professor, with what's going on, how could you even think-', and she interrupted me and said, 'All right, all right.'" He smiled; it was the first time he had won an argument with McGonagall.

"Well done, Ron," said Hermione. "Of course I'll be there, Harry. I'm sure Ginny will, too."

"But you're not going to get a lot of sleep-" Harry started to point out.

"Oh, shut up, Harry," interrupted Hermione. "You would do it for us, don't deny it. Losing some sleep is minor compared to what it is for you. Of course, if you'd rather not have us there..." She raised her eyebrows.

"C'mon, Hermione," he said, a bit annoyed. "It's fantastic that you'll be there, you know that. And I get your point, I shouldn't worry about you when I'm way worse off. Anyway, thank you. It's very good of you."

"See, now, that was what you should have said in the first place. Come on, we'd better get going, we don't want to be late for Dumbledore's class."

As they got up, Harry looked at Ron and said, "Thanks, Ron."

Ron nodded. "No problem."

Most of the students were already there when Harry, Ron, and Hermione reached the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Fortunately, there were three empty seats together near the front, which they took. On Harry's right was Justin Finch-Fletchley, with Ernie Macmillan in front of him.

"Say, Harry," asked Justin, gesturing to Fawkes, "What's up with this?"

Harry had decided that when explaining about Fawkes, he wasn't going to specifically include the fact that Fawkes had chosen him as a permanent companion. "Fawkes is going to stay with me while this is going on. Professor Dumbledore told me that his being around will be helpful."

"I don't doubt it," said Ernie, turning to join the conversation. "Phoenixes are seriously magical. I assume he's going to sing you to sleep?" Harry nodded. "Good, that's good. I'm not surprised that Dumbledore thought of this."

"Actually, he told me he didn't," Harry explained. "It was Fawkes's idea. He knew I was in trouble, and decided he wanted to help." Justin and Ernie exchanged impressed looks.

Albus Dumbledore strode into the room, and all conversation ceased, as if on cue. He carried no books, only his wand. He stood at the front of the class, to the left of the podium. "Good afternoon, and welcome to your N.E.W.T. Defense Against the Dark Arts class. Before we begin, so you will not be overly distracted, I would like to say a few words about Harry's companion."

Dean raised his hand. "What companion is that, sir?" The whole class laughed, including Dumbledore.

"Yes, indeed, Dean, he is rather difficult to miss. I believe you have not yet gotten to phoenixes in your Care of Magical Creatures classes, but I am sure many of you know that phoenixes have calming and healing abilities, especially their song. So, Fawkes has decided to stay with Harry until the current situation resolves itself. He is with Harry all day partly because his mere presence is helpful, and partly as a bonding process. He is getting used to Harry's... aura, if you will. For those familiar with the Muggle world, it is like tuning a radio to the strongest point possible. He is becoming comfortable with Harry. He is very well behaved... yes, Seamus?"

"You mean Harry, or Fawkes, sir?"

"Both, I hope," answered Dumbledore as the class laughed. "He should not be much of a distraction. And I am again referring to Fawkes, Seamus, not Harry," as the class laughed again. Harry looked around. Most people were looking at Fawkes admiringly, but Hannah Abbott had a look of astonishment. She must know about phoenixes, she must know what this means, Harry thought.

"Now, let us proceed with the class. As Harry is doing in his classes, I will be focusing here on things which will be highly practical. But before we do any actual

spells, I would like to discuss the mental element of spellcasting, which I feel is too often ignored.

"It is our mental energy, not our words, which works in conjunction with our wands to give effect to our magic," Dumbledore explained. "This is shown by the fact that it is possible to do spells while remaining silent, which we will be studying soon. We give voice to our spells because it makes them stronger, but they are not made stronger by our voices per se. It is rather that vocalizing them causes us to focus our mental energy more strongly on the spell. Most wizards' spells are not as effective when they are silent, but there are a few wizards whose mental energy is sufficiently highly focused that their spells lose nothing from a lack of vocalization. My intention is to help you learn mental disciplines which will help you do spells silently and effectively, and improve your overall spellcasting abilities."

"Sir," asked Hermione with her hand raised, "why is it that we've never been taught this, nor is it in any of our books? It doesn't seem like the kind of thing that's so advanced that it should have to wait until N.E.W.T. classes."

"You are correct, of course, Hermione. I have long felt that the mental aspects of spellcasting have gone underappreciated by the magical community. People seem rather attached to saying the words, and tend to think that the words are the important things. What I am saying cannot be demonstrated by proof, but I am confident that it is true nonetheless.

"The most important aspect of this, and of spellcasting in general, is to focus your mind. It is particularly helpful to think, not so much of the spell you want to cast, but of its intended result." Dumbledore took a small blue ball out of his robes, and tossed it to one side of the room. "So, if I want to Summon the ball, perhaps I will hear the word 'Accio' in my mind, but I will more be focusing on a mental image of the ball flying into my hand," as the ball did just that. "Now, I will go into various details of how to achieve this focus, and then we will try some practice." Dumbledore talked for the next half hour, interspersed with periods of silence.

Harry could not recall being so interested, so engaged, in a lesson. He felt hyper-aware, filled with confidence. He wondered if that was Dumbledore's influence, or Fawkes's, or something else entirely. He didn't want to question it, but just enjoy it. He found that he intuitively understood Dumbledore's message, and eagerly sought to apply it.

After his explanations were finished, Dumbledore said, "Now, we are going to give this a first try. I want everyone, in turn, to come to the front and try three spells silently. First, turn a classmate blue. Second, Summon the ball. Third, do any spell of your own choosing which is not harmful. Lavender, why don't you start off."

Lavender successfully turned Parvati a light shade of blue, but could not Summon the ball, and her attempt to levitate it failed as well. The next three students did no better. Neville, however, turned Ernie a deep shade of blue, successfully Summoned the ball, and caused a book on his desk to rise and fall. He got a healthy round of applause from everyone, turning a bit red as he sat down.

The next seven students had varying degrees of success, though none was as successful as Neville until Hermione took her turn. She turned Ernie blue, Summoned the ball, and caused the end of her wand to light up like a flashlight. She sat down to applause. "Harry, your turn," said Dumbledore.

Harry got up, full of confidence and focus. He pointed his wand at Ron, imagining him a deep shade of blue, which then happened. He Summoned the ball, wishing it into his hand. He had already planned his third spell; he pointed his wand at Hermione, concentrating. Then he said, "Hermione, have you ever read, 'Hogwarts, A History?'" Harry saw her look indignant, and start to respond, but no sound came from her lips. As soon as she realized what he had done, she looked even more indignant, put her hands on her hips, and gave him an unhappy look. The class roared its approval as Harry silently performed the counter-curse, and gestured to Hermione that she could speak again.

"You would find a way to do your spell and make fun of me at the same time," she said. Harry smiled broadly, and feeling very happy, got another idea. He closed his eyes, concentrated, thought of the support he'd gotten today from nearly everyone at Hogwarts... and a large silver stag erupted out of his wand, and started galloping across the room. The class watched it with astonishment for a few seconds, and applauded loudly. Even Dumbledore looked surprised.

"Thank you, Harry, most impressive indeed. And lastly, we have Ernie." Ernie got up, his body language suggesting he hoped to make as impressive a display as Harry's. He pointed his wand at Harry, and nothing happened. He looked confused, then tried again. Finally, he adjusted his wand's direction, and Harry turned blue.

"What was the difficulty, Ernie?"

"I was trying to turn Fawkes blue, but it didn't work." Some people chuckled.

"Well, you see, phoenixes are highly resistant to magic," explained Dumbledore.

"I can't say I didn't learn anything today," muttered Ernie. He Summoned the ball, then made it hop between his desk and Hermione's. He sat down.

"Now," said Dumbledore, "we will measure the effectiveness of your silent spells in a more concrete way. I will put a spell which has unique properties on myself. It functions as a kind of measuring device. Each of you will silently turn me blue. The spell I put on myself will identify the intensity of the spells you do, in the sense that it will be able to tell how effective the silent spell is compared to a vocalized spell. It

will report a number, displayed in the air. If, say, the number is 62, then that person's silent spells are 62% as effective as their vocalized spells. I chose that number because it is the average for early attempts. The average for fully qualified wizards is 82%, and one cannot become an Auror without a minimum score of 90%. A very few wizards, of whom I confess myself to be one, have scored 100%, meaning the effectiveness of the vocalized and non-vocalized spells are the same." People looked very impressed, but not surprised.

"Sir," asked Ernie, "would... Voldemort be another of those with 100%?"

Harry glanced approvingly at Ernie, who nodded in acknowledgment.

"It seems highly likely, but we cannot know for certain, since he will likely not submit to a test," said Dumbledore. "When he was tested at Hogwarts... he was known as Tom Riddle then, of course... he scored 91% on his first measurement, which is highly exceptional. Do not worry overmuch about your score. It does not measure natural ability per se, but just what percentage of it can presently be accessed without vocalization. A low score simply means that more practice will be necessary. This is just to give you an idea of where you are. Shall we?"

He pointed his wand at himself. "I have cast the measuring spell; now I will do a test." He pointed again, and this time a gold number 100 showed up in the air next to him. The students applauded.

Neville stepped up. "79. Quite excellent, Neville, it is obvious that it will go much higher before long," said Dumbledore as Neville stepped back, clearly very pleased.

Parvati stepped up; "60" flashed in the air. Ernie took a turn, and got 64. He looked distressed not to have done as well as Neville.

Seamus was next, with 54, followed by Dean, with 58. Justin scored 69, then Lavender a 52. Hermione took a turn, and was rewarded with an 85. She grinned proudly as she stepped back. Ron took his turn, and got 85 as well, as well as a few gasps from the class, who hadn't gasped for Hermione, accustomed as they were to her getting the best score on everything. Ron looked quite satisfied to have done as well as Hermione. Harry stepped forward, intently focused. He pointed at Dumbledore, next to whom a gold 100 suddenly lit up. There was a huge gasp; Dumbledore's eyebrows rose.

Harry was quite startled himself. He was feeling very confident, but not quite that confident. He glanced at his shoulder, and a thought occurred. "Sir... is that because of Fawkes? You said that phoenixes have a calming effect, and they help you focus. What we're doing is pretty much trying to focus, right?"

"I cannot say for certain whether Fawkes had anything to do with your score, though it is entirely possible that he did. But since he has only been with you for about five hours, I would be surprised if he had a dramatic effect.

"But keep this in mind, Harry: Fawkes or no Fawkes, what that score means is that at the very least, you have the potential to score 100 in the future even if you have not been around Fawkes for a while. You will reach a point when the only reason to vocalize your spells is to let others know what you have done. This is a unique situation; no wizard has ever been bonded to a phoenix at such a young age that they were taking this test for the first time."

"So, if I took the test after I hadn't been around Fawkes for a few days, my score might be lower."

"Indeed it might, Harry."

"I know you don't know, but if you had to guess... how would I have done?"

"My guess is that Fawkes is affecting your score, but I would be very surprised if your natural score was less than 90," Dumbledore said.

"Sir," asked Justin, does that mean that any of us could know our full potential, if we spent a few hours with a phoenix?"

Before Dumbledore could answer, Hannah cut in. "It doesn't work that way, Justin. Phoenixes don't bond with just anybody, and when they do, they do it for life."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, Hannah, I saw your expression earlier, I realized you knew."

Ernie said, "Wait a minute, does that mean..."

"... that he's with Harry for life, yes," replied Hannah. There was another gasp.

Seeing that this was a topic of great interest, Dumbledore spent a few minutes telling the class what he'd told Harry earlier about phoenixes. "But I am afraid that we must get back to the planned topics of the lesson now," said Dumbledore, to a few chuckles. Some people were still staring at Harry. As before, he didn't blame them.

The last few students took their turns, nobody scoring higher than 70. Dumbledore closed out the topic by saying, "Again, this is only a baseline against which to compare later efforts. The next time you try, you may find that your score has improved significantly."

"Yeah, Harry," teased Justin, "you might get 120 next time."

"Before we move on, I would like to point out one aspect of this, which may be unique to this class. We have Harry with 100, which even with the aid of a phoenix is quite amazing; his unassisted score is almost certainly in the low nineties, which is rare even for fully qualified wizards. Hermione and Ron both scored 85, very high

scores indeed for first tries. Neville's 79 is also exceptional. Now, has anyone any ideas of why this would be? Is there an explanation other than coincidence for the fact that these four students happened to get high scores?"

Unsurprisingly, Hermione's hand shot up. Dumbledore surveyed the students; after a few seconds Ernie raised his hand as well. "Yes, Ernie?" prompted Dumbledore. Disappointed, Hermione lowered her hand.

"They've all been in dangerous situations, Harry the most, Neville the least."

"Was that what you were going to say too, Hermione?" Dumbledore asked. She nodded. "Yes, you are quite correct, Ernie. On several occasions, Harry has had to depend on his magic to save his life. That tends to focus the mind considerably. Ron and Hermione have been in similar situations, though fewer, and Neville, one. There is a high degree of correlation to their scores."

"Now, I would like to introduce a new spell, one which is highly useful in certain defensive situations. It is called the Diffusion Shield. It absorbs and to an extent dissipates almost any kind of spell. One cannot cast it on oneself, only on others, to protect them. The more people casting it, the more effective it is. It is most useful, naturally, in combat situations, particularly when one member of the party has become wandless."

"Couldn't you just cast the Protection Charm instead?" asked Dean.

"The Protection Charm works well enough on the protected party, but not at all on the one doing the protecting. The Diffusion Shield provides protection to all under its influence, though more to the one who is the focus of the spell. So, the Diffusion Shield is far more useful in this situation."

"Does it work on Unforgivable Curses?" asked Neville.

"Not so much is known about that, Neville," answered Dumbledore. "There have, thankfully, been relatively few instances in which anybody could consider attempting to mount such a defense. And since the Unforgivable Curses are illegal and immoral, testing as such cannot be done. What little anecdotal evidence exists is mixed. One party of three is said to have died trying to ward off a Killing Curse; a party of five is said to have survived, though greatly injured. A group of four trying to ward off the Cruciatus Curse were all nonetheless incapacitated; a member of this group later said, 'there was enough pain in that to take out ten people.'"

Neville, sitting behind Harry, muttered, "More like twenty."

"You're not wrong," agreed Harry, turning his head.

Dumbledore continued as if he had not heard, though Harry was sure he had. "The incantation is 'Diffusia,' and we will practice it now. I want everyone in a group of four. Each group will take turns having one member be the recipient of the spell, which I shall cast. Blue, of course. The other three will try to Diffuse it."

Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Neville practiced for a while, doing fairly well. Dumbledore explained that whichever of the group was the darkest blue was the best with the spell, since the others couldn't protect him as well as he could them. It was agreed that Harry was the bluest, with Hermione a close second.

After they were done, Harry asked, "Can we try that against a more real spell, like we'd see in combat? How about the Stunning Spell?"

"That spell can be rather uncomfortable, Harry," said Dumbledore. "If the Diffusion does not work properly, the recipient could be knocked unconscious."

"Well, I'll be the recipient, then," Harry volunteered.

This was followed quickly by a storm of protest. Neville said, "No way," Hermione said "Are you joking?", and Ron said, "Absolutely not!", all at the same time.

Dumbledore smiled. "I think your friends are saying, Harry, that now is not the time for you to be a test subject of any sort."

"I'll be the recipient," Ron said. "Hermione's always telling me I've got a thick head. Besides, with you three behind me, I probably won't feel a thing."

"Very well, Ron, although I will not want to be the one to tell your mother about this," Dumbledore said. Harry and Hermione laughed.

"Well, I sure don't plan to," said Ron. Turning to the others, he said, "I'm ready when you are."

"There's nothing you have to do to get ready, Ron, other than get stunned," pointed out Hermione. Harry, Hermione, and Neville nodded to each other to confirm their readiness.

"I would like there to be two people each near Harry, Hermione, and Neville," said Dumbledore, "to keep them from being thrown off balance." Each was backed up by two classmates.

"I will count down from five, vocalizing the spell when I reach zero. As I start to vocalize, cast the spell. Five, four, three, two, one, Stupefy!"

"Diffusia!" they yelled.

The red ball seemed to hit something a few inches in front of Ron's chest, and it split into four. The smallest part hit Ron, and he was knocked back a step, but quickly recovered. The other three headed for Harry, Hermione, and Neville, and hit them simultaneously. They were knocked back a couple of steps, and quickly caught. "Thanks," Harry said to Ernie and Justin, who were backing him up.

"That went as expected," Dumbledore informed them, "with Ron taking the least of the damage, which means that you three performed the spell quite well."

"Now, we seem to be out of time. That went excellently; thank you for your effort and attention. I will see you all next week." The class applauded; Dumbledore

nodded and headed back toward the office. The classroom emptied after a minute, but Harry asked Neville to hang back.

"I told the first years I'd explain more about my dream and how they happen, and Ron, Hermione, and Ginny are going to stay and listen too. If you want to, you're welcome," said Harry.

"Thanks, Harry, I would. I want to know what's going on."

"Hey, Neville," said Ron, walking up to them, "I forgot to tell you... Seamus and Dean are going to sleep in guest quarters for a while. Nobody's going to get a full night's sleep in our dormitory. You can join them if you want."

Neville glared at Ron, as though he'd been called a coward. "No way, I'm staying with Harry. Besides, I'm the only one who totally knows what it feels like."

Ron gave Harry a 'what did I do?' look, nodded to Neville, and stepped back. Harry patted Neville on the back. "Thanks, Neville. Thanks a lot."

"It's nothing, Harry, really," Neville said, though happy to have Harry's obviously sincere thanks.

Dumbledore, having retreated to Harry's office, came back out again. "I thought I would stay for a few minutes, Harry, if you don't mind."

"No, of course not," Harry said, as a group of first years walked through the door. They appeared a bit startled to see Dumbledore, who smiled at them.

"Ah, you must be the Slytherin first years that Harry's so fond of," he said kindly.

Some smiled, some blushed, some looked down. "You mean he's told you about us?" Helen asked, as though she couldn't believe they were worth mentioning to a headmaster.

"More than once; he has been very concerned about you. He feels in a way responsible for your situation."

"How could he be responsible? All he did was teach us a great class!" said Helen, as the others agreed.

"You are correct, of course," Dumbledore allowed. "But he feels responsibility because it is your admiration for him which caused you to be threatened. In truth, he is not responsible at all, but it is understandable that he feels this way."

"Things are starting to get better," reported Helen, who turned to Harry. "Of course, the first years of all the other houses are totally with us. Some of us have been talking to some second years in Slytherin, and they seem to feel like we do. So we're pretty happy about that."

"I'm really glad, Helen. You're all doing a great job," Harry said.

"Is that a phoenix? I heard you had one, but I don't know much about them. He's really pretty."

"Yes," Dumbledore said, "he is. I will be explaining the situation after everyone arrives, as I understand it a bit better than Harry."

Ten Gryffindor first years walked in, and were greeted by their Slytherin counterparts. Ginny walked in a few seconds later. Andrea Creevey said, "The Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff first years wanted to be here too, but they have a class now. So they made us promise to tell them everything."

Dumbledore took the floor, took a few minutes to explain the situation with Fawkes, and emphasized that everything that could be done for Harry would be. "Harry is fighting a battle that only he can fight," Dumbledore said in conclusion. "But we can help him, and we will."

"Sir, why can only he fight it?" asked Andrea. "I heard it was something about his scar?"

Harry gestured to Dumbledore. "You're the one who told me about it, you may as well be the one to tell them." Dumbledore took a few minutes to do so. "So, his mind is connected to Voldemort in a way that we do not truly understand, and that Harry certainly would not wish. But since Harry is the first to survive a full-strength Killing Curse, his situation is unique."

"Now, I am afraid I must go, I have other business. But I am glad to have been able to talk to you all." He acknowledged their thanks and left by the back door.

"There," said Harry to the group after Dumbledore left, "is someone you really want on your side. Now, I guess I'll just tell you about the dream, and then you can ask questions if you want to afterwards, okay?" The students nodded.

Ron walked over to Harry, holding the Marauder's Map and motioning Harry to be silent. He pointed to where they were, and then to just outside the room, where a dot bore the name Pansy Parkinson. They exchanged raised eyebrows, and Ron mouthed 'keep talking' to Harry, who did. Ron quietly walked towards the door, looking around, drawing puzzled stares from the first years. Finally he saw what he was looking for: the ends of a pair of Extendable Ears. He walked back to Harry and said the word silently, making gestures near his ears to emphasize the point. Harry stopped talking for a moment, looked for the Ears, got out his wand, and focused on the Ears flying into his hand.

They heard a fairly loud shriek of surprise from outside the room, and the Ears flew into Harry's outstretched hand. The students gasped in surprise.

"She's running away, really fast," Ron reported. "We'll never catch her, so no point trying." To the class, he added, "That was Pansy Parkinson outside the door. She was trying to listen to us using this," taking the Ears from Harry and holding them up. He explained how the Ears worked, and where they were from.

"What with this and the Snackboxes, Fred and George are getting a lot of gold off Malfoy, at least," Harry pointed out. "What do these cost, three Galleons each?"

"Five, I think," corrected Ron.

"Oh, and well spotted, Ron," said Harry. "I hadn't thought of that. Thanks for keeping your eyes open." Ron nodded. Harry stepped back and checked with Ron that nobody else was anywhere near the classroom. After Ron gave the all-clear, Harry told everyone about the dream. The hardest part to explain, and the only part he was not inclined to give total disclosure about, was how he drove Voldemort from his mind. At the same time, he knew it was important. First he explained what Dumbledore had told him about Voldemort's vulnerability to love, and the reason for it. Then he told them what he had done in the dream, leaving out only the details of the images he summoned.

Hermione smiled and said, "Thank you, Harry, that's sweet, it makes me feel really good. I promise we won't tease you about it."

"No, of course not," Ginny agreed.

"Well, I don't know if I can make that kind of promise," said Ron, still a bit embarrassed at what Harry had said. Ginny and Hermione, standing on either side of him, simultaneously whacked him on the arm closest to them. "Ow!" exclaimed Ron, as the students giggled.

"Believe me, I'm not totally comfortable talking about it either," admitted Harry to the group. "It's kind of hard to tell someone that you love them, never mind talking about it to a group of twenty-five people. And this has never been easy for me, especially, anyway. But this is about fighting Voldemort, so I'll deal with my embarrassment."

He was just about to start talking again when Ginny walked over to him. She looked him in the eyes, and said, "I love you, Harry."

Harry felt overwhelmed. He managed to say, "Thank you. I love you too." She beamed, hugged him quickly, and went back to where she was before.

Harry smiled, and turned back to the group. "She did that, you may have noticed, so I wouldn't be so embarrassed. If I have to be embarrassed, then she would be too. And I knew she loved me anyway, but I hadn't realized how nice it was to hear someone say it."

"Well, I'm a girl, so it's easier for us," Ginny said to the first years. "Boys aren't encouraged to say things like that, but they still feel them. I mean, I know Ron loves Harry too, but he'd never, ever say so." She grinned wickedly at Ron; the students giggled.

"I knew you were going to drag me into this at some point," Ron muttered to more giggling and laughter.

"I know this focus on love may seem kind of strange," said Harry to the group. "I didn't really understand it at first, when Professor Dumbledore told me about it. But now I've seen it work, so I understand it better. And it makes sense. All Voldemort is, is evil. So it makes sense that love would weaken him, mentally at least. Normally, my reaction to this topic would be just like Ron's. But if you're trying to fight off Voldemort, you take any weapon you can get, and in this case, love is a good weapon."

He finished telling them about the dream, ending with as accurate a description of the pain of the Cruciatus Curse as he could. The students looked pale, several of them cringing. "The only one I know of at Hogwarts who's experienced this, besides me, is Neville," Harry continued, gesturing to Neville. "It happened to him in the Department of Mysteries, after he came into a room with ten Death Eaters to try to save me. Do you think I described it okay, Neville?"

"I think you described it as well as it can be described with words," Neville replied. "Which is not very well."

"I see what you mean. Anyway, Ron shook me awake, but he had a hard time."

"That's putting it mildly, I was beginning to wonder if you'd be able to wake up." To the students, he said, "I yelled at him, touched his arm, even shook him, and finally he woke up. I was scared to death," he admitted. "But what was worst was the look on his face. To have that much pain... I don't think I'm going to be able to forget that look for a long, long time."

"Okay..." Harry started again, not knowing what to say to what Ron had said. "Now you know what happened. Is there anything else that you'd like to know?" Harry spent ten minutes answering questions, until there were none more.

"Well, I guess we're finished... I need to go have dinner and get ready for the Quidditch tryout, or else our captain will get annoyed at me," he said, clapping Ron on the shoulder as he said the word 'captain.' "And one last thing... thank you all for your support, it means a lot to me. And yours too," he added, turning to Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville.

As the first years headed out, a few lingered to admire Fawkes, then everyone was gone. "Well, it's been a busy day, not to mention a long one," said Harry to his friends. "I think I'm going to have a lie down for a few minutes before dinner. See you at six in the Great Hall?" The others nodded, and they all left together.

Harry lay on his bed, and found that once there was nothing in particular to occupy it, his mind went straight to remembering last night's trauma and imagining the one tonight. He tried to work through what he might do, think of ways he might breach whatever defenses Voldemort had. Fawkes remained at his side, sometimes on his chest or legs as he lay in bed. At one point he pet Fawkes for fifteen minutes

straight while thinking about what to do to Voldemort. In what seemed like no time at all, the clock on the wall showed five minutes to six.

After a quick dinner, Harry, Ron, and Ginny headed off to the Quidditch pitch. The position open for tryouts was Chaser; two Chasers had left Hogwarts last year. One Chaser position was taken by Ginny, moving from Seeker, where she had substituted for Harry when he was thrown off the team by Umbridge. To Harry's surprise, and Ron's, the position was won by Dennis Creevey, whose brother Colin and sister Andrea were in the stands cheering him on. Harry and Ron were surprised because he did not strike them as the athletic type, and because he was Muggle-born; Muggle-born students didn't tend to make Quidditch teams all that often, because they hadn't been flying throughout their childhoods as the others had.

When he was told, Dennis was quite excited, and ran over to the stands to tell his brother and sister, who were equally excited, if not more. Harry walked over to congratulate Dennis, and was warmly greeted by all three Creeveys.

"Great job, Dennis. We're glad to have you on the team," Harry said.

"It's so cool that I get to play Quidditch with Harry Potter," Dennis enthused.

"Yeah, Dennis, but you might not get to play much if he catches the Snitch too fast," joked Colin.

"That would be all right," said Dennis.

"Fraid not... I've only once caught the Snitch in the first two minutes... that was my first year, I think. You'll get plenty of chances to play, Dennis. Colin, how come you didn't go out for it last year?"

"I'm not that good on a broom, as it turns out. But I'm a big fan, though. Learned all about it, read up on it, even picked a pro team to support. Did I tell you, Professor McGonagall is going to let me do the play-by-play, now that Lee's graduated?"

"Great! Good for you," said Harry. "Did she give you a lecture on how-"

"I have to be fair and neutral and so forth, yes." Colin acknowledged. "I may have promised more than I can deliver. We'll see."

"Well, she'll be sitting right next to you, ready to yank the microphone away."

Colin grinned. "Yeah, I remember the time Lee swore, and she did that. As long as nobody whacks Dennis with a Beater's club, I should be fine. I thought I'd do a bit of research, to drop in bits of information here and there. For example... 'And Draco Malfoy, the Slytherin Seeker, dives for the Snitch. Malfoy, whose father is in custody pending charges of supporting Voldemort, has failed to secure a Quidditch Cup victory for Slytherin in four years.' How's that?"

"No, Colin, I'm sure she won't find that objectionable at all," kidded Harry.

"Harry, could I ask you a favor? Now that we're all three here together, my parents wanted to get a picture of all of us. But I also wondered, since we're all in your classes, if you'd join us in one." Colin looked a bit anxious.

"Sure, Colin, I'd be happy to," said Harry. Colin beamed and got his camera.

"Oh, yeah... last time I saw that thing, I was burping up slugs," Ron recalled, having just joined the group.

"I kind of wish you had let me take that picture, it would have been a really good one," Colin said, half-seriously.

"I have a feeling you wouldn't think so if you were burping up the slugs," Ron pointed out.

"I guess so. Anyway, this is a different camera. The other one was ruined when I was Petrified. It saved my life, though, so I can't really complain. Okay, here we are. Harry, could you take the first one?"

"Sure, how does it work?"

"You're Muggle-raised, it's just a regular camera, nothing special."

"Yes, but raised by people who never would have let me touch one of their cameras."

Colin looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Harry, I didn't mean to... I forgot, Ginny told me that your Muggle relatives don't treat you very well. I guess that's why you're so humble, you were never raised to think you were anything special."

"The childhood I had was a pretty high price to pay for not being full of myself."

"Yeah, from what Ginny said, it's amazing that you weren't all messed up. But it would be so easy for you to get a big head, I mean, just being Harry Potter would be enough to do it. Can you imagine what Draco Malfoy would have been like if he'd been born Harry Potter? He'd have thought it was his rightful role to be the leader of the wizarding world. He'd have been insufferable."

"Now, there's a nasty thought," agreed Ron. "Of course, then his parents would have died, so some good would have come of it. Here, why don't I just take both, since I don't know any less than Harry does about it. I'll tell my Dad about it, he'll be excited."

Colin showed Ron what to do, and Ron took the pictures. Harry assured Colin that his photographic self would stay firmly in the picture this time. "Do you still have that one of me and Lockhart?" Harry asked.

"Yes, and you never stay in the frame for more than a second or two," Colin said.

"Good," smiled Harry.

It was 9:10, and Harry was walking to Professor Dumbledore's office to witness the meeting at which matters with Malfoy would be decided. He didn't know what Dumbledore was contemplating doing, but as long as it was something, he thought he would like it. He was especially hoping for something that would help protect the Slytherin first years, but was not optimistic, given that that was not the behavior for which he was to be judged.

Harry walked into Dumbledore's office; Snape and Malfoy had not yet arrived. Harry said, "I think I'm getting more accustomed to Fawkes being around. Sometimes I start forgetting he's on my shoulder, which is kind of strange. He flew around the field while we were doing Quidditch, but stayed out of everyone's way. It was neat."

"I am glad that you are enjoying his presence, Harry."

"Can I ask you, sir... do you miss him, since he hasn't been around all day?"

"No, not specifically, Harry. You see, Fawkes does sometimes remain elsewhere for periods of time, up to a few days at a time. Perhaps one could liken them to vacations, though it is not 'work' for him to be in our presence. Perhaps the phrase 'a change of perspective' would describe it better. During these times he is, of course, available at any time should the need arise. You need not concern yourself with how his absence is affecting me, though it is typical for you to do so.

"In fact, if I may make an observation, Harry... ah, Professor Snape, Mr. Malfoy, please come in." Malfoy stood in front of Dumbledore's desk, with Harry to Dumbledore's right, Snape to his left, nearer the door.

Harry sensed that Dumbledore was about to start, but he wanted to say something to Malfoy in front of witnesses, and this was a good opportunity. "I'm sorry, Professor, but before you start, there is something I need to mention to Mr. Malfoy, so if it's all right..." Dumbledore nodded his assent.

Harry turned to Malfoy. "Okay, this is about how you've referred to me when we've talked. You know, Scarhead, get stuffed, and so forth. Now, just for myself, even though I'm a professor, I don't care. I'm so used to you addressing me like that that it seems normal. But the other teachers have been unhappy with me that I didn't give you detention when you did that. They say it doesn't matter if I don't care, that it affects all teachers if any student does that and gets away with it. And I can see their point. So, this is just to warn you. When I asked Professor McGonagall what how I should decide whether to do anything or not, she said I should take your behavior and imagine you had done it to her and not me. Now, I think that's a little harsh, myself," here Harry allowed himself a brief smile, "but I get her point." Turning to Dumbledore, Harry said, "That's all I needed to say, sir. Thank you."

"Professor Potter," said Snape politely but with a hint of his old attitude, "given your history with Mr. Malfoy, do you not think you could be biased when it comes to assigning punishment to him?"

Harry assumed Snape was doing this to put on a show of defending his prefect, trying to give Malfoy a little dignity. Malfoy appeared to be doing his best to be expressionless, but not very well.

"I don't think so, but I can't say it's impossible," Harry said agreeably. "If you'd like, I'd be willing to report whatever Mr. Malfoy does to Professor McGonagall, and let her decide what to do." Harry knew this was no bargain for Malfoy; she would be tougher than he was.

"That is not possible, Professor," Snape replied. "I simply suggest that you keep the possibility in mind."

Harry nodded, then said to Snape and Dumbledore, "Excuse me, I'm just wondering, why is it not possible?"

"A professor cannot abdicate any such part of his responsibilities; that is why they are called responsibilities," Dumbledore explained. "You will simply have to do as you see fit. Now, Mr. Malfoy... I wish that disrespect to a teacher were the least of our problems here today, but it is not. It appears that you have engaged in a campaign to undermine Professor Potter's classes by demanding that his students consume a candy designed to cause the symptoms of illness where no illness exists. Do you admit or deny that this is accurate?"

"I deny it, sir." Harry could have sworn he saw Snape roll his eyes. Malfoy's fate is sealed now, Harry thought. I shouldn't gloat, I shouldn't gloat. But I want to.

"Mr. Malfoy, I have interviewed a dozen Slytherins who say they were strongly pressured by you to avoid Professor Potter's classes in this way. I have letters from ten more who say they saw this or experienced it. Should I assume that all twenty-two are lying?"

"I guess so, sir," Malfoy said unconvincingly. His attitude still radiated the message of, you can't do anything, you've got nothing on me.

"Is it your feeling, Mr. Malfoy, that the school can take no action against you due to the fact that there is no documentary proof of your actions?"

This question seemed to take Malfoy by surprise. "No, uh, I mean, I don't know, sir."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Malfoy, that was actually a rhetorical question. This meeting was not to establish that you engaged in such a campaign. That has already been established to my satisfaction. This meeting was to determine whether you would take the opportunity to accurately report the facts of the matter, as is the responsibility of a prefect. You did not. Although a prefect, you threatened students

if they did not eat the candy to evade Professor Potter's classes. You further ignored Professor Potter's explicit warning to reverse the instructions you had given, and instead, pressured the students even harder. It is therefore obvious to me that you have chosen not to conform to what the school expects of its prefects. You will hand over your badge now, please."

Malfoy's jaw dropped. Even Snape looked surprised. Harry fought to keep the elation off his face.

Malfoy was stunned and furious. "But you can't..."

"I fear you have left me little choice, Mr. Malfoy," said Dumbledore, appearing genuinely saddened to have to do what he was doing. "To say that you are unrepentant is putting it mildly. I must act to protect the integrity of classes at Hogwarts. Deliberate disruption of a teacher's classes is a very serious offense. Your badge, please."

Malfoy stared at Dumbledore as though he were seriously considering defying the request. For all the good it would do him, Harry thought. Finally, it seemed that Malfoy reached the same conclusion. Still furious, he reached up, took off his badge, and put it on Dumbledore's desk rather harder than he needed to.

"There are a few more things I must make clear, Mr. Malfoy. I have heard reports that you have cursed one or more of the younger students in your house. This is not what you are being disciplined for, but I take such reports very seriously. If I hear any more such reports, I will take further action. I strongly urge you not to curse, threaten, or abuse anyone.

"In addition, Professor Potter warned you that you would receive one hour of detention for every Slytherin student who ate the candies you provided. You will now report to Professor McGonagall to schedule those detentions. But his warning is still in force. There are reports that you have provided his first and second year students with the candies as well, and insisted on their use. You will, politely, request their return from those to whom you gave them, and rescind your previous instructions.

"That is all. Professor Snape, if you would escort Mr. Malfoy to Professor McGonagall..." An emotionless Snape led a fuming Malfoy away, closing the door behind him. Dumbledore regarded Harry for a moment, then said, "I would say, Harry, that your attempts to keep your feelings off your face were fairly successful."

"I tried really hard," said Harry with amusement.

"Yes, I did notice. As it happens, while you have many talents, masking your feelings is not really one of them. While not crucial, it is a good skill to have in certain situations. I do think it will come to you, as time goes by. I take it that you are satisfied with the sanctions I imposed upon Mr. Malfoy."

"Very satisfied, sir. I admit I hadn't thought of what you did, but it makes sense. He's always used that badge as, I think Ron said, a license to bully. I really hope this will make him less nasty in the Slytherin common room. I hate to think that he'll take it out on... it's funny, I was going to say 'my' first years. They're not really, but you know what I mean."

"Ah, but they are really, Harry. In the sense of the school regulations, they are not, but in a real sense, they definitely are. They have chosen you as their leader, the one whose example to follow, to trust. It is a great honor and a great responsibility, and I believe you have already experienced both aspects of that situation."

"Yes, sir, I certainly have. Well, I guess I ought to go back to Gryffindor Tower and start getting ready for bed, and for your Occlumency lesson. I'm getting kind of tired."

"It is not at all surprising, given your lack of sleep. There is one other thing, Harry: now that Hermione and Ginny are sleeping in your dormitory-which, by the way, you should realize is a very strong measure of Professor McGonagall's regard and concern; I am amazed that she allowed this-I thought it would be simpler to have the Occlumency lesson there. So, I will see you there at 10:00." Harry thanked Dumbledore and headed back to Gryffindor Tower, Fawkes still on his shoulder.

"Pepperoni pizza!" Harry said to the Fat Lady, and the portrait hole swung open. The common room was filled with activity, but most of it ceased as Harry came in. From Ron and Hermione, everyone knew where Harry had been, and all wanted to know what had happened.

Harry almost asked for everyone's attention, but then realized that he already had it. He could not keep a smile off his face. "Draco Malfoy," he announced to the room, "is no longer a Slytherin prefect." Huge cheers went up, the loudest being from the first years, who sympathized with the Slytherins in their struggle. There was nobody who was not very happy.

"Well, c'mon, tell us everything!", encouraged a fourth-year girl.

"I'm sorry; I'd like to, but I really can't. I was there as a teacher, and it's supposed to be private. Much as Malfoy deserves to have the details of his humiliation spread around the school," he grinned as there were more cheers, "I'd be violating Professor Dumbledore's trust if I repeated everything. But anyway, the details aren't important; the result is." He sat down with Ron and Hermione.

"But you'll tell us later, of course, right?" asked Ron.

"Obviously."

Harry talked with Ron and Hermione for a while, reveling in Malfoy's fall. Soon it was near 10:00, and Hermione suggested that they get into their bedclothes before the Occlumency lesson, so they could go to bed right after it. They headed off to their respective dormitories, Hermione gathering Ginny along the way.

Five minutes later, Harry and Ron watched Professor Dumbledore enter their dormitory room, followed by Hermione and Ginny in their nightclothes. "Bet you got a few stares," said Ron to Hermione.

"Not really, we had told most everyone what was happening already," said Ginny. "I was amazed that nobody made any kind of jokes about it. It's such an obvious target. People are really taking this seriously."

"Well, I believe we know why that is," Dumbledore said. "Now, let's have all four of you on Harry's bed, two sitting forward, two back." He went through the standard exercises, and introduced a few new ideas. Near the end of the time, he did a test, gently trying to slip into Harry's mind. Harry cleared his mind; in a few seconds, in his mind's eye, he saw the golden dog jumping on his lap, then Hermione talking with John when she was explaining the meaning of what the dog was doing, then Hermione hugging him and saying she loved him, then Ginny saying she loved him. The images stopped; Dumbledore put down his wand.

"Sir, that was strange... I usually get images of embarrassing or stressful things, but that time... I don't know how much you saw..."

"You received images of love and affection, yes," Dumbledore finished for him. "That was my intention. In any case, it was not easy for me to get in, even given the friendly welcome I received. It will be harder for Voldemort than it was last night, should he attempt it. This causes me to suggest, Harry, that you add this to what you planned to do to experiment. When you face him, do not give in to anger or rage, even if he taunts you. Keep in mind the images you saw. Come from a place of love. It will make things harder for him."

Harry nodded. "I'll try."

"I know you will. Now, since I saw this, I should mention it; I saw what the dog did, and of course I understand its significance. Hermione, do Ron and Ginny know?"

"Yes, I told them earlier," Hermione said.

"Good, that will save some time." Dumbledore looked at Harry; even though Dumbledore's expression didn't change, Harry was sure he could see affection in Dumbledore's eyes. "Harry... interestingly, I did not even realize that the dog could do what it has done. I tend to forget that I invest a lot of myself in my spells, and my emotional state is a part of them. So, I should not be surprised."

"It is true, as Hermione and John speculate, that I feel for you as one does for a close relative, such as a son or grandson. I never thought to mention it specifically because it did not really occur to me as a conscious thought; I cannot even say when it happened. I believe I unconsciously assumed you knew, as my actions may have indicated my feelings, but it is true that your childhood experiences may have left you ill-equipped to interpret such things correctly.

"So, this is an opportunity to clarify things. I love you, Harry. I care about you a great deal. I wept for you at your loss of Sirius, and I take great pride in your accomplishments, such as what you have done with the Slytherin first years, and the bravery with which you face this trial. If I had a son, I would have been proud for him to have been like you."

Harry choked up as he never had before; he was sure he was going to cry. He reflexively held it back. Instead, he impulsively moved off the bed and hugged Dumbledore. Dumbledore gently returned the embrace. Hermione was crying; Ron and Ginny looked as though they were trying hard not to.

After a half a minute, Dumbledore released Harry. "Thank you, Harry. I believe that now would be a good time to go to bed. Is there anything in particular you would like to be done, any instructions?"

"No, not really... I just hope someone will get to me as soon as possible if it happens. I don't know when I would have woken up without Ron's help, and... it was strange, just after it happened, Ron was holding my shoulders, and I just grabbed at his, I don't even know why. I just felt like I needed to touch him, to touch someone."

Dumbledore nodded. "That has been known to happen in such situations, though it is rare that it actually can be acted upon, as most people receiving the Curse are not in a position to be attended to immediately. But yes, in such a situation, we feel we need human contact. So, I suggest that when it happens, the person at your side hold you immediately, and continue doing so for a time. It will no doubt be helpful to a faster recovery. I daresay one of the girls would volunteer for such duty."

Harry smiled, unable to resist. "I was hoping for Ron, actually." Ron turned red and gave Harry a 'very funny' look. Ginny and Hermione howled with laughter.

Dumbledore smiled and said, "As you wish," making the girls laugh even more.

"So, Professor, what will happen?" asked Hermione. "I mean, if one of these dreams happens, Ginny or I will hold him, then what?"

"First, Fawkes will come and get me. In fact, Fawkes may recognize the dream as it is happening, in which case he will get me, and I will be here before the dream ends. In any case, we will then wait until Harry is prepared to give us an account of the dream, at which time I will have Fawkes bring Professors McGonagall and Snape."

"Snape? Why him?" asked Ron.

"Don't worry, Ron, it's okay," Harry said. "He's been laying off lately. He's been positively polite, for him."

"Professors Snape, McGonagall, and myself are key decision-makers for the Order, so it is important that all three of us hear the account firsthand. After we hear it, we will want to confer, to some extent in private. It will be necessary to discuss things of a high-security nature, so we must go elsewhere. Harry will simply need friendly faces by this point, and you can take it from there.

"I must be off now; I will send Neville in on my way out, and then you should all go to sleep, except for the whoever takes the first watch." Dumbledore took Harry's hand. "We will be here for you when you need us." He released it and walked out.

"He's amazing," said Ron. "I don't know how anybody can be like that."

"He sure is," agreed Ginny. "It was so sweet, what he said."

"Okay, Ginny," Hermione said, "we should split up the night between us. One of us should take the first half, like maybe up to 3:00, and then wake the other, who'll do the second part of the night."

"Sounds like a good idea," Ginny agreed. "So who does which part?"

"Let's flip a Galleon," Hermione suggested. "Dragon side I go first, phoenix side you go first." Ginny agreed.

It came up dragon, so Ginny climbed into Seamus's bed, and Ron and Neville into their own. Hermione took a seat in the chair Dumbledore had conjured not far from Harry's bed. She picked up a book she had brought, and opened it. As they got comfortable, Fawkes's song, which had been a pleasant background noise, increased in intensity. Harry felt more comfortable, and in a flash had the thought: phoenix song, my friends here... this would be great if it wasn't for the fact that I'm going to get tortured in a few hours. Then in the next instant, he thought, don't think about that. Think about the beautiful song, think about your friends, think about how lucky you are to have them. He opened his eyes a bit and looked at Hermione, who was already looking at him. She smiled, and mouthed 'I love you' as she touched her heart and made a gesture which he knew meant the same thing. He smiled at her and closed his eyes again. He reveled in the feeling for a moment, then started to do his Occlumency exercises. He was able to focus on them sufficiently that within twenty minutes, he was asleep.

Chapter 11

The Price of Leadership

Harry wandered through a department store looking at socks. He thought of Dobby, because the store was having a sale on unmatched pairs

Suddenly, he was standing in a graveyard. He started walking, having decided to keep walking the whole time, to see if it could prevent him from thinking he was immobilized. Come from a place of love, Dumbledore had said. Harry thought of his friends, listened to the phoenix song. Again, Voldemort materialized in front of him.

"Keeping busy, Potter?" The familiar voice sounded greatly amused.

"Yeah, I was very busy being supported by all my friends, thanks. How about you? Plans for world domination still on track?" Keep thinking about love, Harry thought. Keep that feeling in mind.

Voldemort ignored the question. "And will this support help you, in here, where they cannot reach you?" he sneered.

In spite of his effort, Harry suddenly stopped walking in surprise. Could Voldemort really not understand this?

"Of course it helps," Harry said, in a tone that suggested that it was obvious. "Do you not even understand how people work? Is any trace of humanity that far behind you?" Think about love, he thought. He saw Ginny's face. He saw Dumbledore's.

"I did not come here to discuss my humanity with you, Potter. You will cease using my name, and cease encouraging others to do it."

"Yeah," Harry replied, "but you know I'm not going to do that. So why are you really here?"

"If you do not stop what you are doing, you will continue to suffer."

Harry almost rolled his eyes. "No kidding? Thanks for telling me, I had no idea. I thought you were just here to socialize." He thought of Hermione, of Ron.

"You dare to mock me?" Voldemort looked disgusted and outraged. "Do you know what happened to the last foolish individuals who mocked me?" His tone suggested that he couldn't believe Harry was so stupid.

"Umm, let me guess... you had a good laugh, and then shared tea and biscuits? Oh, no, wait, you tortured and murdered them, I'll bet. See, the problem is, torture and murder are what you do anyway, whether people mock you or not. And especially me... you've been trying to kill me anyway, since you got back, so it's not as though I have a lot to lose. I think I'll keep on mocking you." He listened to the phoenix song.

Voldemort was snarling, obviously furious. "Very well, Potter... I weary of this discussion anyway. I will weaken you, and destroy you, and the last voice you hear will be your own, pleading for mercy before you die. You will regret your attitude." Knowing what was coming, Harry readied to dodge out of the way. But what to get out of the way of? Voldemort did not seem to be holding a wand.

"Crucio."

All Harry knew was pain. He was screaming, but he was barely aware of it. He did manage to have a thought this time: I have to wake up, he thought, but it was a dim one, next to all the pain. Then he was grabbed, by whom he didn't know, and shaken. He reached out, and felt something solid. More by reflex than by thought, he grabbed it and held on. The sixth year boys' dormitory swam into view. He stopped screaming as he looked down and saw red hair below the shoulders of whoever was holding him. He moved back just enough to see Ginny's face, near tears and terrified. He took a deep breath, and said to Ginny, "Thanks." Then he held her again, fiercely, feeling like he never wanted to let go. She squeezed him so hard he had to make an effort to take his next breath. "Sorry," she whispered, and eased off, squeezing him nearer the shoulders instead.

Looking up, Harry saw the deeply concerned faces of Ron, Neville, Hermione, and Professor Dumbledore, who were at the side of his bed. He appreciated their concern, but he didn't feel like he could talk just yet. He kept on holding Ginny; it seemed like something that he had to focus on, that he drew strength from. He just held her, and she him, for as much as two or three minutes, he wasn't sure. He started feeling better, more quickly than he had the morning before. Holding Ginny a little more tightly, Harry found his voice. "This really helps," he said seriously.

"Part of the effect of the Cruciatus Curse is to make one feel cut off from everything, everything except pain," Dumbledore said. "After even a short time of such isolation, human contact is very healing." He paused. "Are you ready to tell us about it, or would you like more time?"

"I guess I should go ahead and do it," he said, starting to slowly disengage himself from Ginny. "Much as I'd like to, I can't hug Ginny all day."

Playfully grabbing Harry again and holding him tightly, Ginny said, "Sure you can." He chuckled and let himself be held again, not protesting.

Dumbledore chuckled as well. "You can hold her for as long as you like, Harry. I will have Fawkes fetch Professors Snape and McGonagall." Fawkes was gone instantly, but echoes of his song remained. Within less than a minute, Snape and McGonagall were in the dormitory, and Fawkes resumed his song. Snape and McGonagall conjured chairs at the side of Harry's bed and sat.

Harry finally, reluctantly, let go of Ginny, but he kept an arm around her shoulder, and she, one around his waist as they turned so that both were facing the side of the bed. Hermione walked over to the bed, sat on Harry's other side, and took his free hand. McGonagall took in this scene with obvious discomfort; it looked as though only iron self-control was keeping her from criticizing the blatant display of affection in front of her. Harry couldn't help but smile.

"What is it you find so amusing?" McGonagall asked, but Harry thought she knew.

Feeling more fond of her than careful, Harry said, "The look on your face. I know what you're thinking, what you're trying not to say, and how hard it is. I appreciate the effort."

Embarrassment, annoyance, and affection all flashed across her features in seconds, though in such subtle ways that only people who had spent much time around her would have noticed. Affecting a stern expression, she replied, "My expression of support will take the form of allowing you to have this moment of humor at my expense."

"Thank you," he said, looking at her with unabashed fondness. She looked down, and he thought he saw a small smile on her face.

"The dream, Professor Potter?" prompted Snape, in the tone of one whose forbearance was being sorely tested.

"Yes, sorry," he agreed. He told them about it, every detail he could recall. He saw eyebrows raised near the end, especially Ron's.

"You deliberately mocked him?" Ron exclaimed, eyes wide. "What in the world did you do that for?"

"I believe, Mr. Weasley, that he was trying to anger the Dark Lord, to provoke him. To try to goad him into a mistake of some sort."

Harry nodded to Snape. "It doesn't look like it did much of anything, but it seemed at the time like it was worth a try. He had this look of outrage, as if he was shocked that anyone would mock him, like he couldn't believe it. I thought that might be a weakness."

"It may yet prove to be one," Snape replied. "The result of this endeavor may not be one that is immediately apparent. One thing which is highly likely is that he will redouble his efforts to harm you."

"That was also what I had in mind," agreed Harry, as he saw Ron and Neville look shocked at the idea. "The harder he tries, the more likely he is to make a mistake. I was hoping that I could provoke him into trying again tonight, maybe it would be harder for him to do it two times but he might try anyway. If I could get back to sleep, I think it's worth trying."

"It is profoundly brave of you to wish to try, Harry," Dumbledore said gently, "but I think that you will not be able to get back to sleep. The stress of the Cruciatus Curse tends to keep one awake for a while. I suggest that you think about some kind of diversion. As for me, I must leave, and discuss this with Professors Snape and McGonagall." Snape grasped Fawkes's tail, said "Headmaster's quarters," and was gone.

Neville asked, "Why did he have to use Fawkes?"

"He can't be seen leaving Gryffindor Tower," Harry explained. "There's probably people who heard me scream outside the dormitory door, and if they see him, it'll be all around the school. People would wonder why."

"Neville," said Dumbledore seriously, "I must ask you not to reveal to anyone Professor Snape's presence here, or any inferences it may cause you to make. Can you do that?"

"Of course, sir," Neville said. Harry got the impression that Neville only kept indignation out of his voice because it was Dumbledore he was talking to.

"Thank you, Neville. Minerva and I will be off. Harry, I am of course at your disposal at any time." They left.

"Oh, Harry," said Hermione, burying her head in Harry's shoulder. "You're so brave, I really fear for you sometimes."

Harry looked puzzled. Ron, seeing this, said, "I think he's trying to work out whether that's a compliment or not, Hermione."

"You know exactly what I mean, Ron," she said, a bit sternly.

Ron sighed. "Yeah, I suppose I do." To Harry, he said, "It's like, it's great that you're so brave and everything, but sometimes I think we wonder if you're a little too brave... if you know what I mean. I mean, one of those in one night, that's plenty."

"Maybe you're right... I just want to win this, I want to beat him," Harry said.

"You will, Harry, you will," assured Ginny. "And we'll be right here with you."

"Hey, how about another fly? That was good yesterday. Ginny, you can come with us."

"That sounds good," Ginny agreed. "Hermione, you might want to try to get some sleep. It wasn't that long after I relieved you that this happened, you couldn't have hardly gotten any sleep."

"No, I think I had just dropped off when it happened," Hermione said. "I don't know if I'll be able to, but I'll give it a try. If I can't, I'll just take a nap in the afternoon. You all have a nice fly." She gave Harry's hand a last squeeze and climbed into Dean's bed. Ginny Summoned her broom from her dormitory as Ron and Harry grabbed theirs, and they headed out the portrait hole.

Only the very beginnings of dawn were visible as they strode out of the castle. "Why were there no Gryffindors in the common room?" Ginny asked. "Some of them had to have heard it."

"Bet you anything there were some, and McGonagall sent them back to their beds on her way out," said Ron. "Well, Harry, you lead. We'll follow."

They kicked off the ground, and again, Harry felt a refreshing breeze. Fawkes left his shoulder and flew freely, never straying far from Harry. They had flown for

about five minutes when Harry saw a lone figure run out of the castle toward the Quidditch pitch, which they were flying over. Harry wondered if it was one of the first years and whether he should ignore it, but it was still very early, so he decided he'd at least find out who it was. Maybe Hermione wanted to tell them something, or even Dumbledore.

"Ron! Ginny!" He got their attention, and pointed toward the ground and the lone figure, who was still running. He motioned for them to follow, which they did.

Harry had just headed for the ground when he heard a terrible scream coming from roughly where the figure was. A huge burst of adrenaline flowed through Harry as he went into an all-out dive. He yelled over his shoulder, "Fawkes! Get Dumbledore!", but he couldn't see Fawkes now. Harry assumed he must be doing it already. The figure continued screaming; Harry peered to try to see who it was. He was almost close enough...

It was Hermione.

Harry felt dread as he zoomed down even faster. As he focused on getting to the ground as soon as he could, out of nowhere, he was hit by the pain again. Every square centimeter of his body felt excruciating pain, and he forgot that he was on a broom, where he was, and what he was doing; there was just the pain. He fell off his broom, but he had no idea that he had done it.

Fairly quickly-faster than either of the last two nights, but Harry still couldn't say how long-the pain stopped, and Harry slowly became aware of his chaotic surroundings. He thought he was falling, but he realized that Dumbledore was holding onto him. If he had been falling, he wasn't anymore; Dumbledore was holding Fawkes's tail.

"Harry! Grab his tail!" Dumbledore shouted, moving Harry's hand to near Fawkes's tail. He held it with all his strength. "Do you have it?" Dumbledore again shouted. "Yes," Harry shouted back. Dumbledore made a motion that Harry couldn't see, then released Harry. Harry couldn't imagine what Dumbledore was doing. How could he release him and Fawkes? He was in midair too, wasn't he?

Harry had no further chance to worry about it; still carrying Harry, Fawkes disappeared, and reappeared just above the ground on which Hermione lay sprawled. Harry released Fawkes, who immediately started to sing. Hermione weakly looked up at him. "Oh, Harry..." Harry sat on the ground, pulled Hermione to a sitting position, and held her tightly; he had to fight back tears. This war he had started had claimed its first victim other than himself. In despair, he wondered whether there would be more, and who they would be.

Harry was soon made to wonder if Hermione was reading his mind. She looked into his eyes, and said, "It's not your fault, Harry. Don't ever think that it is." He

tried to answer, but choked up instead, and he put his head on her shoulder and hung on. He briefly wondered who was comforting who. I guess both of us, he thought.

After a minute, she said, "Oh, Harry... I thought I had some idea... you and Neville are right, it just can't be described..." She trailed off as Neville came running up.

"Hermione! I thought I heard you scream! Did they do the Curse on you?" he asked, breathlessly.

Still holding Hermione, Harry nodded. "Both of us."

Hermione's body jerked suddenly as she looked at Harry. "You too? Again?"

Harry realized it made sense that she hadn't known; when he was attacked, it was the initial few seconds after hers, and he knew that she was bound to be badly disoriented. "They got me in midair, I fell off my broom. Professor Dumbledore saved me, but I don't really know what happened. He had Fawkes drop me here, I guess so we could take care of each other."

Hermione held him again; Harry knew that she was now thinking of what happened to him, rather than to her. "It wasn't that long, less time than with Voldemort. I think you had it longer. I heard you scream too; I was diving toward you when whoever it was got me."

"Nott," she said.

"Not what?" he asked, confused.

"No, it was Nott. Theodore Nott, the Slytherin sixth year, one of the ones whose father is a Death Eater."

"Did you see him?"

"No, but..." she released Harry and took out her wand. "Accio Map!" she said, and the Marauder's Map flew into her hand. "I took out the map back in the dormitory a few minutes after you guys left... I was sure I was over-worrying, but I did it anyway. I saw Nott heading out to the pitch, and I knew it wasn't good. I ran out there as fast as I could, and started yelling for you. I never saw him; either he was hiding, or was under an Invisibility Cloak. I saw you start to fly down, and then..." She shook her head.

Harry looked at the map. It showed two groups of dots: one, which included Snape, McGonagall, and Nott, was heading toward the castle; the other, comprised of Dumbledore, Ron, and Ginny, was heading toward them. Harry looked up and saw them approach.

"Are you and Hermione all right, Harry?" asked Dumbledore.

"I guess the answer is yes, but neither of us feels great right now," Harry said.

"No, I would not think so. I would suggest you go to Madam Pomfrey's, but I suspect there would be little she could do for you. You may want to head back inside, to your dormitory. It is probably safe outside here now, but given what has just happened, inside would be better. Hermione, I assume you saw Nott on the map, and came out to warn the others?"

She nodded. "She very probably saved your lives, all three of you," Dumbledore said to Harry, Ron, and Ginny. "Nott had an Invisibility Cloak and was on a broom; he would have Cursed each of you in turn, causing you to fall off your brooms and be killed, then flown off, away from Hogwarts. It is highly questionable whether Fawkes could have summoned me in time to help you, and I could not possibly have saved all three in any case."

"Why did he do this, sir?" asked Hermione. "It isn't because..."

Dumbledore nodded somberly. "He cheerfully admitted it to me when I apprehended him. He was acting on Voldemort's instructions, given within the hour."

Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville sat in a semicircle of five chairs in the Gryffindor common room at a few minutes before 5:00 a.m. The rules said that no one was supposed to be in the room until 6:00, but none of them really cared about the rules right then.

Harry was in misery. Hermione, the one Cursed longest and for the first time, should have been the one worst off, but Harry was drowning in a sea of guilt. I caused this, he kept thinking. This wouldn't have happened if not for what I did. He didn't say anything about it, because he didn't want to seem to be whining about his own guilt when Hermione had been Cursed. But the others could tell.

Neville simply came out and asked, "Harry, did you blame yourself for what happened to me at the Department of Mysteries?"

"Of course I did, Neville," Harry answered. "I was responsible for everything that happened there. I was the one who took us there."

"See, I don't think so," replied Neville with uncharacteristic boldness. "I don't think that you 'took' me there; I think that I made you let me come. You didn't want me, Ginny, or Luna coming because you felt responsible for us. But you weren't. We were. We chose to come. You need to understand that, Harry. Only I am responsible for what I do. Even if you ask me to do something, and I do it, I'm still choosing. You have nothing to feel responsible for. And Hermione... you know very well that she would have knowingly run full-on into a Cruciatius Curse if it even meant a chance at saving your life. And there was no reason to think anyone would be in any danger except you, and you chose that. Do you think Ron and Ginny blame you because they could have been killed by Nott along with you? We do this because we believe in you,

Harry, and what you're doing. You don't help us by deciding that you're responsible for everything that happens to us.

"Do you know why I ran into that room at the Department of Mysteries? Ten of them and one of you, and I think I knew that I had no chance. But I couldn't live with myself if I had done anything else. I didn't want to have to look in the mirror and know that I ran away while a friend was cornered. You wouldn't have wanted me running into that room. You would have wanted me to be safe. Maybe it was a stupid thing to do, but you didn't ask me to, I chose to. So appreciate what Hermione did and think about helping her, and stop feeling guilty. She deserves better." Neville looked around as if expecting someone to challenge him, then looked ahead again, as nobody did.

There was a short silence, then Ron said, "You know, Neville, I'm sure that's the longest I've ever heard you talk. You made a lot of sense." He looked at Harry.

"You should do it more often," said Ginny, to Neville. "He's right, Harry. We all know it. You know it too if you'll admit it. I understand why you feel that way. Something horrible happened to Hermione. But it's Voldemort you should be angry at, not yourself. Neville is really right. We all make our choices."

Harry was silent for a moment. He looked at Hermione to see if he would see an accusation in her eyes, but all he saw was a plea. He exhaled.

"Look... I know Neville's right, of course, especially about you, Hermione. This goes back to our conversation, remember, in the library on my birthday? You talked about this exact situation, about how it was your choice if you want to risk yourself for me. I guess I understood it in my head, but not in the actual situation. I know it's right. But if you were in my position... I know I have to get used to it. I just wonder if I can."

"I know it must be hard, Harry," Hermione said. "But remember what I said; imagine how you'd be if our positions were reversed. If you had to endure the Curse for a few seconds to save all our lives you wouldn't hesitate, and you'd be annoyed at us for worrying so much about it. Look at you. You're enduring the Curse for far less tangible reasons. They're important, and I agree with them, but you see what I mean."

"Again, you're right," Harry admitted. "I don't know what else I can say."

The others by unspoken agreement decided to leave it there, and let Harry work through whatever he had to work through. They talked for a while about various aspects of the situation. Harry, Neville, and Hermione exchanged impressions of the Curse, while Ron and Ginny voiced their fervent hope that they would never face it. Sometimes they went silent for a few minutes at a time.

As 6:00 approached, Harry said, "You know, maybe we should all go back to the dormitory. People are going to start coming out here, and I don't know if I want to be asked twenty times what happened."

"We'll just tell them once," suggested Hermione. "We'll pick a time, like 6:30, and tell people that's when we'll tell anyone who wants to know what happened." Seeing Harry's reluctant expression, she added, slightly reproachfully, "Look, I know that speaking to a large group of people about something like this isn't your idea of fun. But they support you, they're concerned about you, they want to know what happened. We happen to be out here, and it seems wrong to hide."

He knew she was right, and felt somewhat abashed that wanting to hide had been his first impulse. "I didn't say I wouldn't do it," he said defensively.

She opened her mouth to respond, then changed her mind and said nothing. After a few more seconds she said to the others, "So, 6:30, then?" Ron, Ginny, and Neville nodded. Harry reflected that it was strange that he hesitated to do as Hermione suggested, but had made a special effort to tell the first years what had happened yesterday. He had done it mainly for the Slytherins, he knew, because he was proud of how they were defying Malfoy. Remembering how he'd felt at the Hog's Head, how he hadn't wanted to talk to that group, he wondered if he didn't mind talking to the first years because unlike this or the Hog's Head, it had been his idea. He also wondered if being a teacher and having more experience speaking in front of groups, even if for only a week, had made him less resistant to what Hermione was suggesting. He knew that last year, he would have strenuously resisted telling seventy people what had just happened. This is what I get for urging people to say Voldemort's name, he thought.

Hermione spoke, with more compassion this time, and Harry was again made to wonder if she could somehow read his thoughts. "It's important to let people know about this, Harry, because after getting people to say his name, you're even more of a symbol. People are still nervous about saying his name, and what's happening to you is the reason why. They fear the consequences. Part of what you have to do is win this fight, but you have to do it publicly, so people can see. The more people know about what happened, the more confidently they'll say his name once you've won this, and that's the whole point of what you're doing."

He nodded solemnly, again knowing that she was right. He hadn't intended for his life to become a public spectacle, but he now understood that by urging others to say Voldemort's name, he had involved them in what had happened. Once word starts getting out, he thought, the Prophet's bound to send someone out. Boy, I hope it's not Skeeter. That thought prompted him to ask, "Hermione, whatever happened with Skeeter? The year's up, is she back reporting again?"

A hard expression came over her features, and she shook her head. "She called me in the fireplace after the school year ended, to make sure she could write again, since I'd said she couldn't write for a year. But we got into an argument, because she was being horrible and nasty. I tried to tell her that she shouldn't write about us, or write to hurt people... she seems to have a big problem with that. I ended up telling her, fine, you can wait another year, if you're going to be that way about it. She was really angry, but there's nothing she can do about it, and she knows it. Maybe she'll think it over, and decide that writing responsibly is better than not writing at all."

Harry's first reaction was to wonder whether that was such a good idea, but he didn't feel like debating Hermione right then. Also, he wasn't unhappy that if the Prophet sent someone, it wouldn't be Skeeter. He hated to imagine how she would twist what was happening

At 6:00, students started coming down from their dormitory rooms. Word about what would happen at 6:30 started to spread; people who were sleeping in were woken up. The first year boys had been awoken by Harry's scream and had not gone back to sleep. One of them, David Finch-Fletchley, approached Harry shortly after 6:00. Harry told him what would happen, and on an impulse, asked him if he had arranged with the Slytherin first years how they were going to find out about the dream.

"Yes, I'm supposed to meet Hedrick at 6:15 to talk about whatever I know, and plan how to meet them to tell them more later."

"If you can do this very quietly," Harry said, "tell them that they, the Slytherin first years, can come with you to Gryffindor Tower and hear it for themselves." David's face lit up.

Hermione looked askance at Harry. "You do know that it's against the rules for one house's students to enter the common room of another house, right?" she asked. Harry just looked at her, and she sighed. "I was just mentioning it. You could probably break any rule you wanted right now and no one would say anything."

"Just this one, right now. You think that can be done in time, David?"

David nodded. "They stay pretty close to each other. Hedrick'll run and tell them, and they'll all come. I'll go try to find him now." He ran off.

"These first years seem to do a lot of running, don't they?" Harry mused. "I don't remember running so much when we were first years."

"Kind of depends on whether you include running away from three-headed dogs, I reckon," said Ron.

"We didn't have much to tell the other houses then," Hermione said. "They do, and it's nice to see all the first years united about something. That something being you, of course, Harry."

"Good idea to tack that on, there, you never know when Harry's going to be in one of his 'thick' periods," joked Ron.

"Thank you for that, Ron," said Harry, deadpan.

"No problem, mate."

The room filled up quickly. Nobody said much to the five that had been in Harry's dormitory, because they would soon be telling the story anyway. Two minutes before they were to begin, Harry saw the portrait hole open, and one by one, the ten Slytherin first years came in. This caused a minor stir, but nobody particularly objected.

At 6:30, Harry stood up. The room was very full; he assumed that everybody from Gryffindor was there. As he was about to start talking, the portrait hole opened again, and David Finch-Fletchley appeared. He was followed by, to Harry's surprise, Justin and Ernie.

"Heard there was a spot of rule-breaking going on here, Harry," smiled Justin.

"Yes, and as a prefect, I had to check it out," added Ernie.

Harry couldn't help but glance at David, who shrugged in a please-don't-be-mad-at-me way. Harry smiled, and said to the room, "These are my friends, Justin and Ernie, from Hufflepuff. I didn't invite them, but I'm glad they're here. Now, these ten," he said, gesturing to the Slytherin first years, "I did invite, on my personal authority as a Hogwarts teacher." He paused for a second, then said with a small smile, "However, if nobody happened to mention this to Professor McGonagall, that would be all right with me." Most everyone laughed. "I've pushed her far enough with the rules, with Hermione and Ginny sleeping in our dormitory."

This did not cause a stir among Gryffindors, who already knew, but the Slytherins were quite surprised, and Justin and Ernie were astonished. "McGonagall let you... you mean she..." Ernie trailed off, still shocked.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Ernie Macmillan is speechless," grinned Justin.

"Mark this day on your calendars." This got a big laugh; Ernie gave Justin a dirty look that Harry could tell was not serious.

"There is actually a good reason for it, Ernie," Harry explained. He told them about the need for and helpfulness of physical contact after the Curse, and that it was better for him if someone was standing by. "Now, for some reason," Harry went on, "my friend Ron here wasn't up for the job."

As the laughter died down, Ron responded, "Sorry, Harry, you're just not my type."

"Anyway," Harry continued, "I invited the Slytherin first years because, besides the fact that I like them, they're having a hard time in Slytherin, because of a certain ex-prefect, and I want to support them. I want them to know firsthand what's going on with me." The Slytherins smiled, and Justin and Ernie looked stunned.

"You mean, Dumbledore took away Malfoy's badge?" asked Ernie. When Harry nodded, Justin and Ernie made animated gestures of triumph, which got more laughs.

Having given them the background, and with Fawkes on his shoulder, Harry told the story about the dream. As he proceeded, the gasps from the crowd got bigger and bigger as he mocked Voldemort more and more blatantly. Harry's tea-and-biscuits comment got something between a laugh and a gasp. When he relayed Voldemort's final threat, there was silence. Harry added that he wasn't all that bothered by it, because it was probably nothing Voldemort wouldn't do anyway. "He just wants to find another way to threaten me, and I think it frustrates him that his threats don't work. Since he can't really threaten me with much worse than will already happen if he catches me, if anyone's going to defy him, I'm the perfect person to do it.

"Now, some of you are probably wondering why I went out of my way to mock him like I did." There were quite a few murmurs of assent. "Part of it was natural; I think he was being a bit dense, as if everyone's just going to bow before him if he makes a threat. But I was also hoping to make him angry, maybe get him to make a mistake."

"Like what?" asked a fourth year named Jennifer.

"I was hoping to recognize it when I saw it," chuckled Harry wryly. "I mean, if I know I'm going to get tortured anyway, I may as well try to accomplish something. So, he had enough of talking and hit me with the Curse. Ginny was there to catch me, help wake me up, and cling to for dear life for five minutes or so. It is really amazing how that is. Nothing was so important as holding onto someone. Then I told Professor Dumbledore about the dream. But, unfortunately, there's more that happened this morning, so I'll just tell it, with help from my friends as needed."

Harry explained how they'd gone out for a fly, then asked Hermione to give them her version of the next events. "I used this magical device we have that lets you know where people are at Hogwarts," she said, not wanting to be too specific about the Map. "I saw that Theodore Nott was heading out onto the pitch, and considering what time it was, I knew I had to warn them. I ran out, yelling to them; I didn't see Nott, but I knew he was there. I saw Harry start to come down. Then the next thing I knew, I was on the ground in unbelievable pain. Nott had done the Cruciatus Curse on me." Most gasped, especially the younger students.

"I can't believe it... I know he's a sixth year, but isn't he still a bit young to be doing that kind of thing?" asked Ernie.

"His father's a Death Eater, Ernie," Harry pointed out. "They probably teach it to their kids at a young age. Anyway, I still have no idea that Nott's there, I hear Hermione scream, I'm going to the ground at full speed. Then he hits me with it, and I fall off my broom." There were more gasps, and the Slytherins looked especially frightened. "I don't exactly know what happened next, so I have to hand it over to Ron and Ginny, who were behind me."

Ron stood next to Harry. "Well, I saw Harry scream and go over, and to be honest, I thought he was done for. I dove for him, was going to try to catch him or at least break his fall, but I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have made it. But a lot of other stuff was happening. First, when Hermione screamed, Fawkes disappeared. He'd been flying with us. I figured Fawkes was going to get Professor Dumbledore. A couple of seconds later, Dumbledore is there, holding onto Fawkes' tail. Now, several things happen at once here, and Ginny may have to help me. Dumbledore sees Harry falling. Fawkes disappears, and reappears next to Harry as he's falling-and Fawkes stops flying, they both are falling with Harry. Dumbledore Summons Harry's Firebolt, grabs Harry, and-still falling-grabs Fawkes's tail. Fawkes starts flying again." There were low whistles and other noises of appreciation from the audience. "They must have been ten feet from the ground at the end. Ginny, can you pick it up here? I think you saw more of the rest than I did."

Ginny stood on Harry's other side. "When Dumbledore got ahold of Harry, he had to do something with him, quick, if he was going to catch whoever did it. Remember, it's been only about fifteen seconds or so since Harry got Cursed. But Dumbledore tells Harry to grab Fawkes's tail, and Harry manages to do it. Then Fawkes takes Harry over to Hermione. They'd both been Cursed, they could hold onto each other. See how Dumbledore's thinking of stuff like this, even with so much going on.

"Now, Fawkes disappears, and Dumbledore should be hanging onto nothing in midair, but he grabs Harry's Firebolt that he'd Summoned. He immediately did a spell that sent a kind of a... wave of the color red, is the best way I can put it. It looked like it was designed to make everything it touched red; suddenly we can see someone on a broom who we couldn't see before. Ron and I tear off after him, but it wasn't like Dumbledore needed our help. Nott could've Cursed us off our brooms and made Dumbledore's job harder, so we weren't thinking really straight. We just wanted to get whoever did this.

"I don't think Dumbledore ever moved. He sent another spell at Nott, and just yanked him toward him, like with a big hook or something. They set down, and Ron and

I did too. Dumbledore takes off the Invisibility Cloak and sees who it is. Dumbledore says, 'On whose instructions was this done?' Nott smiles and says, 'I have the honor of serving the Dark Lord.'" The room gasped. "Dumbledore asks him when he got the instructions; Nott says it was just minutes before Harry, Ron and I went out on the pitch."

Harry took the floor again. "This makes sense when put together with my dream. I was going out of my way to get him angry. So, he finished talking to me, contacted his spy at Hogwarts, and he must have basically said, kill Potter the next chance you get. He had a perfect chance there; he could have snuck up on all three of us, Cursed us off our brooms, had us fall to our deaths, and flew away. It should've worked. It would have, but... Hermione saved all our lives by running out there. She knew she was running straight into danger, but-"

"But I followed the example you have set for us, many times," she pointed out. And suffered like I've suffered, many times, Harry thought, but did not say.

"Anyway, so it looks like Voldemort was mad enough at me to try to order me killed, but given what happened, it looks like a bad idea. He had a spy at Hogwarts, and he got his cover blown just so he can try to kill me? Without a plan worked out well in advance? You don't blow a spy just because you're mad. I think I really ticked him off, and he took a chance, which failed. Not good planning. So, this can be seen in a good way overall."

"Yeah, but maybe there's more than one older Slytherin he can use as a spy," said a seventh year. "Malfoy, and those two baboons."

"Somehow I don't think he's going to use Malfoy," Harry said. "Anyone they use has a decent chance of being caught, and I don't think they'll take that risk. But Crabbe and Goyle, yes, I can see that. They don't do much but take up space around Malfoy."

"We'll try to find out what we can," said David Septus. "We'll let you know if we find out anything." The other Slytherins nodded.

Harry walked over to them, and crouched to be at eye level with them. "Look... if you do that... please, be extremely careful. This has changed now, you're not just risking getting bullied by Malfoy. If you find another spy, and they know you found them, they could torture you, they could kill you. Think about that."

The Slytherins mostly looked somber, but a few looked defiant. "Do you think he actually would? Kill us, if we found out something?" asked Helen.

"No, probably not, because that would blow his cover, too," Harry admitted. "What would probably happen is that he would do a Memory Charm on you, make you forget what happened. But we can't be sure. Not everyone can do a Memory Charm, and they can be broken. If you find a spy and he knows it, he could decide his best

chance is to kill you and get out of the school before he's caught. You just can't know. But this is serious. I know you understand that idea, but it feels different after something really bad happens to you, or someone you care about." He glanced over at Hermione.

Hedrick stepped forward. "We'll be really careful, we promise."

Harry nodded. "Okay... well, we should finish up now, and go over to the Great Hall while breakfast is still being served."

"Can't, Harry," Ron said. He was looking at the Map, but holding it low and behind a chair so no one else could see it. "Pansy Parkinson's right outside the portrait hole."

"Great," Harry muttered. "Obviously, Justin, Ernie, and the Slytherins can't leave until she's gone. I'll step outside and tell her to go away. Nobody leave until I come back."

Harry climbed outside the portrait hole, and was face to face with Pansy Parkinson. "You know, this is an odd place for you to be hanging out," he said.

To his great surprise, she looked anxious. She said, "Oh, Harry, I'm glad it's you that came out. I want to talk to you. I want to help you."

Harry was stunned; this was the last thing he expected to hear. He said nothing, but his expression spoke volumes. Parkinson seemed to understand.

"I know what you're thinking, why should I believe her, she's Draco's friend, she's still with him, she just wants to find out stuff to help him. Is that about right?"

Harry nodded. "Also, 'she's dumping him like a hot potato because he lost his badge and his power, but if he ever gets it back...'"

She looked down. "Yes, I understand that too. The timing looks pretty suspect. And it is related, but not in the way you'd think." She paused, then looked at him intently, as if it were very important that he be made to understand. "You see, Draco's just gone off the deep end. He's been in a rage against you being made a teacher. It got worse all week, especially after you embarrassed him both times in the Great Hall, and then last night, when he lost his badge, he just lost it. He says he wants to kill you if he gets a chance. I don't mean that as a figure of speech, I mean, he actually wants to kill you. I think he's serious."

"I had no problem with the Snackboxes thing at first. It was a prank, fine, no problem, no one gets hurt. But after you found out, and told him to stop it, I tried to get him to stop, told him it wasn't worth it. But he wouldn't listen. Something's changed... it's like, he's become this ugly person I want nothing to do with. I mean, he's always hated you, but he had some perspective, knew not to break the rules. And

especially, now that he's not a prefect anymore, I think he just doesn't care, he's that mad."

She exhaled. "I've been thinking about this for a few days now. I'm not proud of a lot of what I've done, Harry. I've been really mean to you, and Hermione, for no reason except that it made Draco happy. I've been mean to other people, for him. I heard about what you said to the first years, that they should think for themselves, and what you said to him yesterday, that he should go spend time with the people who agree with everything he says. I realized I'm one of those people. I'm not sure how it happened. But I don't want to be that anymore." She stopped talking and looked at him expectantly.

Harry was still stunned; this was so opposite the character he'd seen of Pansy Parkinson. The obvious thing to think was that this was a transparent attempt to curry favor with those who she saw had more influence now. But there was something about her that told Harry that she was sincere, at least at this moment. All he knew for sure was that he could not afford to take her at her word.

He wondered if he looked as confused as he felt. "Pansy... if you were me, what would you be thinking right now?"

She looked frustrated and impatient. "I already said I know it looked suspicious. This isn't easy for me to do, Harry. Please don't play games with me. I want to know what you think."

"I'm not playing games with you, Pansy, at least I don't mean to. But... did you hear what happened to Hermione this morning?"

She nodded. "Some of the seventh years saw what happened from our window. They said he Cursed Hermione, and then almost killed you. That's another reason I'm here. I mean, I'm not saying I like her all of a sudden. It's easy not to like her-you and Ron didn't either, at first, you know, the look-at-me-I'm-so-smart thing. But I wouldn't wish that on her, and I know it was brave of her to run out to help you. When Draco heard about it this morning, at first he was really happy, but soon all he could do was moan that Nott didn't manage to kill either of you. I was disgusted." She finished talking, then added, "But you still haven't told me what you think."

He nodded. "I asked if you knew what happened to Hermione because I wanted to make sure you knew how serious this is. People's lives are at stake, Pansy. This thing I've started against Voldemort"-she flinched-"has gotten serious. What Nott did, he did on direct orders from Voldemort." She gaped in astonishment, and he was sure she was not faking that. "He admitted it to Dumbledore. My point is that I'm kind of the leader of this, and there's now violent resistance to it. If I trust the wrong person, people I care about could die, literally." She nodded evenly, showing she understood.

"Now, that doesn't mean I don't believe you. What you say and your reasons for it make sense. Professor Dumbledore is always saying that people can change, and do. I want to believe you. Part of me does believe you. It feels like you're telling the truth. But you have to understand that for now, I can't confide in you with information that could hurt me or my friends if it got out. I think you can understand that."

Again, she nodded. "I'm not saying I want to be part of your inner circle or something. I mean, you people get in a lot of trouble, and I'm not sure I want that. I don't support... I'm sorry, I can't say his name... but I don't want to get killed by him, either. Anyway, I can help you without you trusting me. The question is, should I be more open about it, or pretend I still like Draco and get you information you couldn't otherwise get?"

Harry was startled; she was offering a potentially major resource. "The problem with the second one, Pansy, is that you could end up dead. These people have shown that they will kill. I mean, you might be able to find out some helpful things, but I doubt they'd be worth risking your life over. You have to be the one to decide, but the first one seems a lot safer. I wouldn't ask anyone to do the second."

She smiled, but somehow even this was strange to Harry; he hadn't ever seen a genuine, happy smile from her, but only one reflecting satisfaction from having pleased Malfoy. "I think I'm beginning to see why the first years like you so much. You don't even like me, you don't know that I'm not lying to you, but you're still worried about my safety. Well, I'll think about it, and decide which one to do."

"I should go before I'm seen, but I want to say a few other things quickly. One, I really admire what you're doing with saying the Dark Lord's name. I'm too scared to do it, or to be seen to be doing it, but I still admire it. Also, a lot of older Slytherins were saying they thought there was something wrong with Nott, ever since he got back. They said, and I thought so too, that he seemed somehow a different person, somehow colder, like he'd lost his personality. I guess that makes sense, if he was a Death Eater all of a sudden. Anyway, I don't know if that's helpful to you or not, but I thought I should mention it. Lastly, I wanted to admit that I was the one trying to listen in on you yesterday. Draco gave me the Ears and told me to, but I was curious for myself anyway. I was shocked when you Summoned them away. It was you, wasn't it?" He nodded. "I heard about your 100, I shouldn't be surprised. I'm sorry about that, but I wasn't going to tell him what happened anyway. By the way, Draco got 78, he was furious at being lower than Longbottom. I'll go now, I'll talk to you again when there's a chance." She hurried off.

Harry's head still buzzing, he waited until she was out of hearing range, then said "Pepperoni pizza," and climbed in past the open portrait. He was met by curious stares. "That took an awful long time," observed Ernie.

Harry knew he couldn't say anything about what had happened in front of so many people. "She was giving me a hard time, saying that I had no right to say where she could walk or stand. I eventually got tired of her arguing and threatened detention, and she finally left."

"Should've threatened it a lot sooner," grumbled Ernie. "I'm pretty hungry."

"I'm a little hesitant to give detentions to prefects unless there's an excellent reason. That's something you should appreciate, Ernie."

"Well, I guess you have me there," Ernie agreed. "Ron, is the coast still clear?"

Ron checked the map, and gave the thumbs-up sign. Ernie and Justin were the first out, followed by the Slytherins, then finally the Gryffindors. Harry motioned for Ron, Ginny, and Hermione to follow him into his dormitory, which they did. They sat down on his bed, and he told them about his conversation with Parkinson. They seemed as stunned as he had been.

"She's always been so awful," Hermione said with disgust. "Do you believe her, Harry? I mean, you were the one who saw her, only you can judge."

"Everything she said made sense. Let's put it this way, if she's lying, she was extremely clever about it, like she knew exactly what to say to make me believe her. She didn't overdo anything. She said she didn't need to be trusted, and understood that I couldn't. She admitted that she still doesn't like you especially, Hermione, but that you didn't deserve the Curse."

"Very big of her," said Hermione, unimpressed.

"The point is, she wasn't all, 'oh, it's terrible about Hermione, that poor girl,' that sort of thing. She said you still have a look-at-me-I'm-so-smart kind of thing-

"The girl obviously has no idea what she's talking about," interrupted Ron, smirking.

Hermione shot him an angry look. "I'm really not in the mood for that right now, Ron," she warned.

He looked startled, then said, "Sorry," and looked down.

Harry continued, "She's not sucking up, I know that much. Also, she didn't have to admit that it was her with the Ears; she didn't know we knew it was her. Deep down, I think she's genuine, but I, we, can't afford to take that risk. I'll take what information she gives me, but with a big grain of salt. I'm not giving her anything that could hurt us. I think she understands that. We'll just have to see what happens."

"Are you going to tell your first years?" Ginny asked, meaning the Slytherins.

"I thought about it, but if Parkinson is genuine and does end up risking herself, ten people is too many to know. And they don't need to know, because I don't exactly trust her myself, so there's not much I could tell them anyway. They'll deal with her as if she were hostile, which is probably for the best."

Ron agreed. "She was right, the timing was extremely suspicious. Right after Malfoy falls from power. But like you say, it could be legitimate, and we'd be stupid to just tell her to get stuffed."

"It doesn't sound quite so stupid to me," Hermione muttered. "But, yes, I understand."

"Well, let's go get some breakfast," Harry suggested.

They started to get up, but Hermione looked at Ron. "Ron, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have snapped at you. I know we do that all the time, I'm just not in a good way right now."

Ron nodded. "I understand, thanks. I know you haven't slept. I assume you're going to come back here after breakfast and get some sleep, right?"

"Yes, I did plan to. Harry, could you do me a favor? I'm still kind of emotional right now. When I come back to sleep, would you come too, and ask Fawkes to sing? I could really use it."

"Sure. I can't say for sure that he will, but I'll ask him."

"Thanks." They headed off for breakfast.

They walked back into the dormitory an hour later, having had breakfast and fended off numerous requests for recaps of the night's dream from many Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws, and a few Slytherins. Hermione took the initiative to patiently explain that Harry had gone through it once for the Gryffindors, and couldn't really tell it to everybody individually. Ron would then add that the gist of it was that Harry refused again to cooperate, was defiant, and suffered the Curse again. That seemed to satisfy most people. Most people didn't ask about the incident with Nott, not having yet heard that anything had happened.

They headed back to the dormitory, and Hermione got ready to sleep. There was nothing special for Ron or Ginny to be doing there, but they were still concerned about Hermione, so they stayed with her. She curled up in bed. Harry said, "After you're asleep, I'm going to go see Dumbledore. Ask him about what he thought of the dream, and get his advice about Parkinson."

"Okay, Harry," Hermione said, "but take Fawkes with you when you go. It's more important that he keep bonding with you than that he sing to me." She had that pleading look again, and Harry swallowed the objection he had ready.

"I'll tell you what," he offered. He turned to Fawkes, as ever on his shoulder.. "Fawkes, I wonder if you'd be willing to sing for a bit, to help Hermione to sleep. When she's asleep, I'm going to visit Professor Dumbledore. You can either come with me, or stay with her, depending on which you think is best. Is that okay with you?"

Fawkes's response was to start singing. Hermione let out a contented moan as she got comfortable. "Thank you, Harry, and you, Fawkes," she said.

Ron turned to leave, then looked at Hermione. "Umm, Hermione... I wanted to thank you for saving our lives." Ginny, obviously proud of Ron, put her arm around his shoulder and nodded in agreement.

Hermione smiled. "I was glad to be able to do it. It makes what happened worth it, something I can be proud of instead of feeling like a victim." Ron and Ginny thanked her again and left.

Harry sat down next to the bed, and started petting Fawkes. He watched Hermione close her eyes. She opened them again in a minute, looking at him. Remembering last night, he smiled, mouthed the words "I love you," and made the same from-the-heart gesture that she had made. She smiled, closed her eyes again, and was asleep in minutes.

Harry waited for about fifteen minutes before getting up to go see Dumbledore. When he did, Fawkes stayed on his shoulder. Harry gave Fawkes an 'are you sure?' look, then continued out. Fawkes let out a last, long note, then stopped singing.

Harry knocked on Dumbledore's office door, which promptly opened. Harry walked in to find a man sitting across from Dumbledore. "Oh, I'm sorry, sir, I didn't know you had-"

He was interrupted by Dumbledore's welcoming gesture. "Not at all, Harry, we were discussing you anyway, so your arrival is fortuitous. Harry, this is Hugo Brantell, and he is working on a story for the Daily Prophet."

Harry stiffened. He knew this was probably unavoidable, but his first inclination was to think that any reporter would be similar to Skeeter, and even if he wasn't, the Prophet still was the instrument of the campaign against him last year. To his surprise, the man chuckled and stood. He was tall, in his mid-thirties, Harry guessed, with an expression that radiated both humility and confidence. "I understand your reaction, Harry, but let me put your mind at ease. I am not one of those who were writing negative stories about you last year. I am what Muggles would call a freelance reporter, and I refused to work for them at a time when they had such an obvious political agenda."

"I have known Hugo for some time now, and have read much of his work. I am confident that he will be fair and straightforward in his article," said Dumbledore.

Harry's concern evaporated. If Dumbledore thought that, it was good enough for him. Hugo proffered his hand, which Harry shook, and took a seat.

"Now, Harry," said Brantell, "there is something I want to tell you before we start. I have a very unusual magical ability. Professor Dumbledore is a Legilimens, which as you know means he can tell if someone is being truthful or not. This can be learned, though by relatively few wizards. I have this talent naturally, and a knack for understanding a person's mood. Now, we can all read moods from faces and gestures; it's a necessary human social skill. I have that skill to an unusually high degree. I don't recall having ever been wrong in estimating a person's mood."

Harry couldn't resist asking, "Have you ever met Professor McGonagall?"

Brantell and Dumbledore laughed. "Yes, on several occasions," Brantell chuckled. "It is a bit more of a challenge. You're quite fond of her, aren't you, Harry?"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "I can see where people don't get to keep many secrets from you. Yes, I am. She's strict, but fair, and I think most of the students in her house know she likes them, even if she doesn't show it much."

"Now, before I ask you some questions, I believe Professor Dumbledore wanted to mention a few things to you. Oh, and I hope you don't mind me taking the liberty of using your first name." Harry shook his head. "Please call me Hugo. You will be referred to in the article as 'Professor Potter,' of course."

"Harry," said Dumbledore, "I thought I would explain why I agreed to this article, and tell you some of the ground rules, so you will know. First, there has been great interest from the Daily Prophet in doing an article about you ever since it became known that you had joined the teaching staff. As I am able to dictate who enters the Hogwarts grounds and who does not, I was able to impose some conditions, such as who would be allowed to write the article. As I said, I am comfortable with Hugo's presence.

"I also agreed to allow the article because the interest in you is very understandable. Of course I respect your privacy, and I know that being the Boy Who Lived, you have had precious little of it. But being a teacher at Hogwarts makes you a public figure, after a fashion-you have an impact on people's children, so they will want to know about you. It is also the case that your campaign has been getting back to parents' ears; some approve, some are concerned, and a vocal minority are ruled by their fear and disapprove. I would like your reasons and activities to be a matter of public knowledge so that parents will understand why you are doing what

you are doing. I know you hope that what you do will inspire the magical community in general; this will help that occur, if it is to occur.

"One of the ground rules is that sixth and seventh year students can be quoted by name, but others cannot, for family privacy reasons. Also, you will of course be using Voldemort's name, which the Prophet does not wish to print. But obviously we cannot have a situation in which you are saying 'Voldemort' but the article quotes you as saying 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named,' as it would defeat the purpose of what you are doing. After some negotiations, it has been agreed that when you or any student or teacher use Voldemort's actual name, what is printed in the paper will be the letter 'V' followed by eight dashes. This was not entirely satisfactory to me, but the paper was highly reluctant to do even this much; they fear reactions from their readers, not to mention Voldemort himself. But they did agree to this, and also, to offer their readers a choice; if they use their wand over the article, Voldemort's full name will appear. All this will be explained to readers in a short accompanying article. Is all that acceptable to you, Harry?"

"If it's acceptable to you, sir, it's acceptable to me. So, go ahead," Harry said to Hugo.

"It is not difficult for me to notice, Harry, that you have a deep bond with Professor Dumbledore. You trust him implicitly. How did this come about?"

On the spur of the moment, Harry decided to open up, though his natural inclination would be to give minimal answers. Dumbledore had told him that Brantell could be trusted to be fair, and he remembered what Hermione had said about the whole wizarding community now being involved. He hadn't looked that far ahead when he had started, but he knew it was true. This could be my only chance to say what I want to say and have it not be twisted around, he thought.

"I don't know if I could say easily, Mr., uh, Hugo. But you know him; I can't see how anyone could get to know him and not like him. I suppose you could say that it evolved over time. He's never been anything but kind, patient, supportive, understanding, and very wise. He seems to always know exactly what to say or do in any situation. I can't think of anyone who could be a better role model for students than him." He looked at Dumbledore, who was smiling, apparently not at all embarrassed.

Hugo stared at Harry for a moment, grinning broadly. It struck Harry as an unusual reaction. "What?" asked Harry.

"I'm sorry, Harry... I'm smiling at what I picked up from your answer. Most people are embarrassed to say such things. Not only are you not embarrassed, you were positively happy for the opportunity to let Professor Dumbledore know how you

feel. It's very... sweet, if you'll pardon the expression. Now, to move on a bit... which other people in the wizarding world would you say you are close to?"

"Well, the Weasleys, of course. Arthur and Molly Weasley are great people, they've always been very good to me. They regard me as one of the family, which makes me very happy. And of course their two youngest children, Ron and Ginny, are very close friends of mine. Also, I'm very fond of the twins, Fred and George, who looked after me quite a bit in their time at Hogwarts, and who now own a great joke shop in Diagon Alley-

"Which you would like mentioned in the article?" grinned Hugo.

"I really would," agreed Harry, also grinning. "They were also on the Quidditch team with me, which was one of the ways they looked after me. They were a great pair of Beaters, and if anyone took a cheap shot at me, Fred and George made sure they regretted it. A Seeker is pretty vulnerable, so it was nice to know that they were there. Apart from the Weasleys, I'm very close to Hermione Granger, who's a very sweet person. I'm also close to Rubeus Hagrid, the Care of Magical Creatures teacher, and the kindest man and best friend a person could want; Neville Longbottom, a very nice person; and Remus Lupin, who taught Defense Against the Dark Arts a few years ago. I'm especially grateful to him because he took extra time with me to teach me how to ward off dementors, which has saved my life more than once. There are other people in the magical community who have been good and helpful to me, but those are the main ones."

"Professor Lupin resigned at the end of that year at the insistence of parents who discovered that he was a werewolf, isn't that correct?"

"Yes, that's right, and I was very unhappy about that. Those people who complained didn't even know him, didn't know what a good person he is. I've found out through knowing him that being a werewolf is a manageable condition, if the proper care is taken."

"What are your feelings about being the Boy Who Lived, whose name and scar are known to every person in the wizarding world? It must be a very unusual life."

"Yes, it has been," Harry answered. "Of course, I was raised by Muggles, my mother's sister and her family, so I didn't even know about my history until I came to Hogwarts. I had no idea that everyone would know me; Hagrid had to explain it to me when he came to get me for the first year at Hogwarts. But yes, it was very strange. Can you imagine people coming up to you, recognizing you, and commenting on something that happened when you were too young to remember? Acting like you were someone special when you hadn't done anything to merit it? From my point of view, it was bewildering. I think I've gotten used to it by now, though."

Hugo went on to ask Harry questions about the D.A. and how it led to becoming the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, his campaign to use Voldemort's name, the situation with Fawkes, and the current dream encounters with Voldemort, ending with Nott's attempt on his life that morning.

"...so, even just this morning, both Hermione and Professor Dumbledore saved my life, which was one of the reasons I came up here in the first place, to thank him for that. But it's typical of the support I've gotten at Hogwarts. In the past few days, since this started, so much of Hogwarts has supported me and helped me, it's been really great. I really appreciate it."

Hugo got up; so did Harry and Dumbledore. "Thank you, Harry, you were very patient. What I'm going to do now is go around the school, talking to people, asking them about you and your campaign. Then I'll ask for some of your time just before dinner, to get your comments in response to what others have said. Is that okay?" Harry nodded.

Hugo left, and Dumbledore looked at Harry. "I am sorry not to have warned you about that, Harry. That took a good part of your morning. I felt that it was important for the wizarding community to understand what you are doing and why, to see you for who you are and not what the Prophet claimed for much of last year. Now, I gather you came up here to discuss a few things?"

"Yes, sir. But I did want to thank you for this morning as well. And of course, thank you too, Fawkes," he added, turning his head toward the phoenix on his shoulder. "I know he couldn't have done it without you."

"Yes, I am glad you recognize that, Harry. We were very pleased to have been able to help, although I admit to having had pangs of regret that I failed to discourage you from flying without adequate protection. Yesterday, I was there to look after you. Today, I was not."

"It's not like you could have known what would happen, sir. I thought we assumed that Hogwarts was secure. I should be able to go out onto the pitch alone with no problems. You can't go rooting out any spy that there might be at any time."

"All true, I admit, but the feeling of regret is there nonetheless. But you know how I feel, Harry. I can see that you have been deeply pained over what happened to Hermione. Is that what you came to talk about?"

"Yes and no," Harry said. "My head knows that it was her decision and not my fault. Neville gave quite a speech about it, you should have heard it. But my... heart, I guess... is having a hard time catching on to the idea."

"I should hope so, Harry. The better your heart is, the more the people you lead will respect and love you, but you will also suffer in this way more. That is as it should be; that is the price of leadership. A life, an injury, should never be spent

without regret. If we ever look at humans or other creatures as pieces on a chessboard, we forget what life is all about, and lose our humanity.

"I hate to say this to you, but I must. You are leading an important part of the resistance against Voldemort, something important to the morale of the wizarding community. Voldemort feels very threatened, and what happened this morning will not be the last such attempt. People you care about may die, and you will conclude that it was your fault, for leading the campaign. I have been through this. It is agonizing. We lost many good people, including your parents, in the last struggle against Voldemort. Many of those lost were carrying out my instructions. I wept, literally, for all those dead, all those tortured. I imagined myself at fault. I knew I truly was not, that those who suffered had chosen their actions and were proud of them. But, like you, I could not easily salve my conscience by telling myself this.

"You must accept your pain without becoming debilitated by it,. Your head keeps you dispassionate, helps you to make hard decisions. Your heart reminds you that you are human, and cherish life and love above all else. If your heart is good, as yours is, the people under your leadership will know it, and respond. The Hogwarts community is stirred by your bravery, and is rallying to help you. They respect both you and the cause you fight for. If some are injured or die, they know that you would have gone in their place if you could. There is nothing more you can ask of yourself. You must remind yourself that the cause is just, and the dead and injured, willing. You will be deeply pained, but know you must continue. You are not a good leader if both of those are not the case."

Harry was silent for a few minutes, mulling it over. Dumbledore waited patiently. Finally, Harry said, "I think I'd rather deal with the Cruciatus Curse."

"I have had the same thought, Harry. At least that affects only the one person. No doubt that is why you felt this way about Hermione; you thought it was only yourself you were placing in danger. For someone like you, that seems ideal. But, unfortunately, life does not work that way."

"I guess not, sir. I do want to thank you for what you said. It may not be some easy solution, but knowing there is no easy solution is helpful too. I can get used to the idea that I'll just have to deal with this.

"But this topic reminds me of something else I wanted to ask you about-"

He was interrupted by knocking on the door, which opened to reveal Snape and McGonagall, who entered. "Yes, Severus, Minerva, I'm sorry not to be ready for you. Harry came to see me, and Hugo waylaid us a bit. By the time Harry got to what he wanted to talk to me about, quite a bit of time had passed."

"I understand, Headmaster," McGonagall said. Turning to Harry, she said, "I assume your look of distress is for Hermione."

Harry's eyebrows rose. "Is it that obvious?"

"I have seen a very similar look on Professor Dumbledore's face on more occasions than I would care to recall. I sympathize with you, Harry, but as the headmaster has undoubtedly told you..."

"...there's nothing for it, yes. Not what I wanted to hear, but it is something to work with, anyway. I'm glad that what I'm feeling is normal, that I'm not alone in feeling this way."

"Indeed not, Harry. If the professors do not mind, and you do not, perhaps you can ask what you were going to when they entered." McGonagall and Snape made no objection.

"Yes, sir... I was wondering, in both the dreams, Voldemort has made all kinds of threats against me, which, especially in the one this morning, are almost laughable. For myself, I have nothing to lose, and he should know that. But if he wants to threaten me, he couldn't do it more effectively than by threatening people close to me. Why hasn't he done that? It seems so obvious."

"One would think so, Harry. Fortunately, he does not. This is a blind spot of his. He simply does not think in these terms. I have mentioned to you that for him, love and friendship do not exist. They might as well be alien concepts. He would laugh at a threat to his followers; he would evaluate it strictly in terms of its impact on his power. So, he does not think to threaten us in this way, nor do his followers."

"But he must know, as facts, that love and friendship do exist, and impact people's lives. I mean, why does he think I'm doing this?"

"He thinks you are doing this," Snape supplied, "either to gain power for yourself, or in a vain and stupid effort to gain notoriety in the magical community. That is why he cannot understand why his threats have not been effective. They usually are. He is wondering whether you are not actually as deranged and attention-seeking as the Prophet has suggested."

Harry looked at Snape open-mouthed. "You're kidding!" he gaped. He looked at the others. "Well, this is a good thing, isn't it? If he has that little understanding of the situation?"

"Yes, it is," agreed Dumbledore. "He appears to be vastly underestimating you, which can only be to our advantage. He still perceives a threat to the awe and fear with which he is regarded, but it appears that he feels that if you are responsible, it is largely by accident, as if some members of the community are so misled as to believe in such a foolish person as yourself. He will probably still feel this way even after tomorrow's article is printed. He will continue to threaten, and attack you if he can, but he does not know what he is up against."

"Recall the words of the prophecy: 'He will have power the Dark Lord knows not.' As I have already told you, one of those is love; you have demonstrated the ability to use it to push Voldemort from your mind. We now see that another such 'power' of yours is the ability to inspire others to rise up against him. He understands this not at all."

"It appears, Professor," added Snape, still amazingly even-mannered and not in any way hostile, "that your choice of tactics against the Dark Lord was inspired, though you could not in any way know this. I believe that he suspected that you were unbalanced for no other reason than that you were openly opposing him; what you did last night seems to have confirmed that impression. Who but an unbalanced person would mock him so, or be so disdainful of the Curse? The Curse inspires terror in those who have experienced it; that you are unbalanced is the only explanation he can accept of why it does not do so for you. He cannot recall the last time he was spoken to in such a way. I have attempted to reinforce this impression, with only minor exaggerations necessary."

Harry couldn't help it; he laughed out loud. Snape looked a bit startled; Dumbledore smiled. "I'm sorry, Professor," Harry said to Snape. "I know you weren't deliberately joking, but it was funny. I assume, then, that my impression was right, that he was really mad? I mean, he went and blew a spy because he was mad. That doesn't seem like a really good idea. If I can set aside what happened to Hermione, it seems like last night was an overall plus for our side."

"Exactly right, Professor," confirmed Snape. "He acted in anger, and lost an operative. But the decision, while impulsive, was not a foolish one. The Dark Lord did not yet know that Fawkes is with you, and if not for Fawkes, you and the others would have died, at his hands. Overall, last night was a plus for us, though more by chance than by design."

"I'll take what I can get," said Harry, as much to himself as anyone else.

"One thing I will say, Harry," said Dumbledore, "is that you were in good form. Were the situation not so grave, I would have laughed out loud at the 'tea and biscuits' comment. No doubt it infuriated him greatly."

Harry smiled. "It just seemed like a stupid question. I mean, what did he think I was going to say? So... does anyone have any ideas about what I should do tonight?"

"First of all, do you, Harry?" Dumbledore prompted. "Your intuitive choices have been good ones, and you are the one in the situation. Your ideas will be more important than ours."

"Well, I haven't had much time to think about it, but I was thinking of taunting him even worse," Harry said. "It seems to be working."

"We have considered the question, and that is one of the two main options we see. The other is an idea of mine, which I will run by you now. Do you recall that I suggested yesterday that you 'come from a place of love'? I am thinking of suggesting that you talk to him while coming deeply from such a place. If you do this, you would focus on love while talking to him, let it emanate from everything you do and say. Express sorrow and pity for what he has become, but in a loving way. My thinking is that this would have two positive effects: one would be to further confirm his impression of you as unbalanced, and the other is that he would be disgusted and appalled. Those two facts combined may encourage him to abandon the current enterprise as fruitless."

Harry considered for a moment. "Yeah, that's good. I like the idea. It seems like it should work, or it could have unintended benefits. What I like most about it is that he won't understand it. I'm not sure how he'll interpret it, but if I can project it well enough it could affect him the same way it does when he's tried to possess me."

"Yes, Harry, that possibility had occurred to me as well. In any case, you should keep the flexibility to change your plans, if your intuition should lead you a certain way."

"No, I really like this," Harry said. "This is what I'm going to do."
"In that case," said Dumbledore, with a serious expression, "I would advise you to, until the end of this crisis, focus your efforts in that direction-not only in the dreams, but during the day as well. Two years ago, you spent hours one day working on the Summoning Charm, in preparation for the one time you would have to use it. If you spend as much time as possible during the day developing the frame of mind that you want to have when facing Voldemort, it will be easier to come from such a place mentally when you do encounter him."

Harry could see that it made sense, even though it seemed strange. "How should I do that, exactly?"

"Simply stop frequently during your normal activities, and make a conscious effort to summon the feelings you have used before, especially when you drove him from your mind in the first dream," explained Dumbledore. "The more you do this, the easier it will be to do, and the stronger it will get."

A lot like learning a new spell, thought Harry. "I understand; I'll do that." He resolved to try as hard to do this as he did the Summoning Charm; he had seen how Voldemort had reacted to love, and he badly wanted to win this fight.

"Very well, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Was there something else that you came to talk to me about?"

"Yes, Professor. I wanted to ask you... how you decide whether to trust someone or not. I've always known who was with me or against me, but now I realize it may not always be so clear."

"Certainly, Harry, but... may I know why you ask at this particular time?"

Harry involuntarily glanced at Snape before answering. "There's an older Slytherin student who's come to me, offering to be helpful to me and what I'm doing, but it's someone who I never would have thought-"

"Professor Potter," interrupted Snape in an annoyed tone, "it is obvious why you have not said this person's name. I assure you that whatever is said in this room does not leave it, nor will any actions indicate it. I would have thought you had known this by now."

Harry looked at him seriously. "I do know that, Professor, about things that relate to Voldemort. But I didn't know how you would feel about things that related to your house. You might feel that I was interfering and insist on handling things your own way."

"Why should I think you are interfering, Professor? You have only turned my house upside down and caused a struggle for control and influence. I see no reason to think you are interfering in any way." Harry got the impression that Snape was trying to keep the sarcasm out of his voice, but not very successfully.

"I think you know, Professor, that all I want is for the students who like me or my class not to have to fear saying so. I don't think that's too much to ask." He paused. "Anyway... the person who came to me is Pansy Parkinson."

Snape's eyebrows went up a bit, as did McGonagall's. Harry related some of what she'd said. "On the surface, I find it very hard to believe, given how she's always acted. But what she says is believable, and she seemed sincere. My intuition, if that is what it is, says that she's being truthful."

"Always listen to your intuition," urged Dumbledore. "If it is ever wrong, it is probably because you mistakenly took some other feeling for intuition. When you learn to always recognize intuition for what it is, you will make fewer mistakes."

"I cannot, naturally, offer an opinion on whether Miss Parkinson is sincere or not. You will have to make that judgment for yourself. But to answer your general question, obviously the person's stated motivation for offering help is very important. There are many other factors to consider, of course. Almost too many to mention. May I ask how you responded to her offer?"

Harry related what he had said. "It seemed important to her that I believe her, as if something emotional was at stake for her, but I can't imagine why."

"It is sometimes hard for us to understand how other people think. The obvious possibility is that despite herself, what you have done has inspired her as

well, and she suddenly realized better possibilities than being Mr. Malfoy's sycophant. But, again, I cannot pretend to know. It must come down to your judgment. Another of the burdens of leadership, I fear. I am sorry I cannot be of more help."

Harry nodded. "I understand. I know I can't tell her much. I don't want anything to happen to my Slytherins." To Snape's expression, Harry said, "You know what I mean, Professor."

"They might as well be yours, Professor," Snape said, and again Harry was very conscious of Snape trying to keep his voice level. "I expect them to be starting a Harry Potter fan club any day now."

"It appears that the club would quickly grow in membership," chuckled Dumbledore.

"Speaking of your Slytherins, Professor," said McGonagall in one of her sterner tones, "Two Hufflepuffs, including a prefect, and your Slytherins were seen heading away from Gryffindor Tower this morning, followed by the whole of Gryffindor house. What do you suppose might have been the reason for that?"

Harry knew full well that she knew what he had done, and suspected that she was not truly serious, so he decided to risk a joke. Not totally able to keep a smile off his face, he said, "I wouldn't want to speculate on that, Professor."

"I'll bet you wouldn't," she scoffed. Dumbledore was smiling. "You are aware that that is against the rules?" she asked, but Harry was sure now her heart wasn't in it.

"Hermione did mention that to me," he admitted.

"At least she did that much," McGonagall said resignedly. "Well, I suppose that given what is going on, I can't pretend that it's of great concern. I will ask you not to be too blatant about it."

"I won't, Professor. I only did it because-"

"I know why you did it, Harry. The impulse is admirable. It just... does not sit well with me. I am used to the rules being followed."

"I understand, Professor, and I appreciate your tolerance." He turned to Dumbledore. "Anyway, I think that's all I wanted to talk to you about, Professor. I'll let you get on with your meeting now." He stood up.

"Always a pleasure, Harry," said Dumbledore. Harry nodded to all of them and left. As he walked away, he mused that Dumbledore had not been able to offer him any specific advice about Parkinson, but he felt more comfortable with the situation anyway.

It was a slow afternoon for Harry. He went back to Gryffindor Tower, to sit with Hermione for a while as she slept. Fawkes sang, and Harry found it soothing to just sit there, watching Hermione and listening to Fawkes. It occurred to him that he had never really watched anyone sleep before. She seemed very content, he thought.

After getting some lunch, Harry went back to the kitchens to say hello to Dobby, which he hadn't done since the term had started. As usual, Dobby was thrilled to see him, but very fearful for Harry for what he was doing, and in awe of what Harry was going through. Having heard more superlatives in a short time than he would have thought possible, Harry wished Dobby well, and headed off to see Hagrid, of whom he had not seen much either.

His knock on Hagrid's door was greeted, as usual, by loud barking. Hagrid opened the door and welcomed Harry as Fang slobbered all over Harry in an affectionate sort of way. "Come in, come in," said Hagrid.

Harry stepped in and, to his surprise, was greeted by Hugo Brantell. "Harry, what a surprise," he said. "I was just finishing up talking to Hagrid here. Like most people at Hogwarts, I'm finding, Hagrid didn't need much prompting to talk about you."

Harry grinned at Hagrid, who looked embarrassed. Harry said, "Sorry, I didn't know you were in here. I just wanted to visit Hagrid, since I haven't seen as much of him as I'd like, what with all that's going on."

"Well, sit down, Harry," Hagrid urged. "Like he said, we were almost done."

"Did he tell you," Harry asked Hugo, "that he got me my owl? It was the day he got me, before I'd even been to Hogwarts. I didn't even know what owls were for. He got me one because it was my birthday, but I think he also just felt bad for me."

"Yeh should've seen him," said Hagrid to Hugo, sounding nostalgic. "Little tyke, wide-eyed, not knowin' anythin' about anythin', I mean about who he was. So innocent, there was jus' somethin' about him that yeh couldn't not like."

"That was very nice of you, Hagrid," Hugo said. "Owls aren't cheap."

"And mine's a really nice one, too," Harry added. "Snowy white."

"So, Hagrid, what were you saying when Harry knocked?"

"Well, like I said, he and Hermione and Ron were always gettin' inter stuff they shouldn't have been. If somethin' was happenin', they had ter find out what it was."

"Well, that's not fair, Hagrid," Harry protested. "I mean, for the first year, yeah, maybe, but I had to do it, I didn't want Voldemort to get the Sorcerer's Stone, so I think I had a good reason. And the second year, I got involved because I was the one hearing voices all over the school. If you heard voices that no one else could hear, you'd want to find out what was going on, too."

"Well, maybe yer right," Hagrid allowed. "Always jus' seemed that way ter me."

"Well, thank you, Hagrid," said Hugo, standing up. "Thank you for your time, I enjoyed talking to you." He reached up to shake hands with Hagrid, smiled at Harry, and then left.

"Nice man, nice man," said Hagrid after Hugo had left. "Unlike that one a few years ago, he didn' seem ter mind if I said nice things about yeh."

"Sorry I haven't been able to see you much, Hagrid," Harry said. "I've been kind of busy..."

"That's one way o' puttin' it," Hagrid said. "I'm glad yeh came ter see me, yeh know it's hard fer me ter come see yeh. Low ceilin's. But I wanted ter. I'm glad everyone's been supportin' yeh so well. Yeh deserve it."

"Thanks, Hagrid," Harry said. "Let me ask you, do you think what I'm doing is the right thing to do?"

Hagrid hesitated. "It is, Harry, yeh know it is. Yeh don' need ter ask me."

"But you wouldn't do it, if it were you," Harry guessed.

"Only because I wouldn' be brave enough," Hagrid grunted in embarrassment. "Yer the brave one. I know it's a good thing ter be doin', I know the reasons. But yeh know how hard it is fer me ter hear the name, never mind say it."

"But that's exactly what I'm trying to change, Hagrid."

Hagrid rolled his eyes and fidgeted, then sighed heavily. "All right... his name is... Voldemort. Yeh happy?"

"Yes, thank you, Hagrid," Harry smiled and patted him on the back. "That's the best way to support me. Keep doing that."

"Wish I could jus' give yeh money instead," Hagrid muttered. Harry chuckled.

They talked for a while about recent events. Then Hagrid said, "Yeh know, Harry, I've been proud of yeh for a lot o' things since yeh've been here. But Fawkes choosin' yeh, that's one o' the big ones. Tell yeh what I think, I think he was used ter Dumbledore, and chose yeh because yeh have the same qualities Dumbledore does, or yeh have the potential ter."

Harry was touched. "Thanks, Hagrid. I don't know if you could think of any nicer thing to say about me than that."

"Well, I should be off," Hagrid said roughly. "Time ter go see Grawpy."

"Oh, yeah, how's he doing?"

"He's fine, fine, vocabulary's comin' along. Still gets a mite impatient now an' then, but doin' better. Don' need ter tie him down any more, that was a big step. I'd invite yeh ter come see him, but I know yeh're really busy."

Harry was certainly glad for the excuse; he had a feeling that Hagrid said 'gets a mite impatient' where others would say 'throws a fit.' He really did want to

see Grawp again, but preferred to at such a time when he didn't feel in danger of being accidentally crushed. Harry bade Hagrid goodbye, and headed back to the castle.

Hermione got up in mid-afternoon, feeling much better; she petted Fawkes and thanked him as soon as she saw him. Ron joined them for some Transfigurations practice and homework, and then Harry and Hermione worked on Potions for a while. Harry was not going to enormous effort to keep up with his homework in most classes-he knew his teachers would excuse it while his crisis with Voldemort continued-but he was determined not to lose a step in Potions. Harry didn't assume Snape's tolerant attitude would last, and so took nothing for granted.

Later in the afternoon, Hugo visited Gryffindor Tower to interview Ron, Ginny, and Hermione, before doing his final one with Harry. He asked for Ron first. Harry suggested they use the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, and Hugo and Ron went off. Hugo took a half hour with each of the three, then asked Harry for his final interview.

Harry asked if Hugo minded if they joined him for that interview; Hugo agreed but asked that they try not to comment unless asked a question, as his time was limited. They agreed, and walked to the classroom.

They sat down in students' chairs. "Harry, I've been talking to Hogwarts students for seven hours today, and even after only a week, your students are effusive in their praise of your classes. Are you surprised by this?"

Harry nodded. "Very surprised. I mean, Hogwarts has never had a sixteen-year-old teacher. I didn't know what to expect, and even though I led the D.A., I didn't think it'd be the same as teaching. I was just hoping not to do badly."

"You said you felt a lot of support from the Hogwarts community. Do you think it is support for you personally, or what you are encouraging others to do?"

Harry raised his eyebrows; he hadn't thought about that. "You'd know better than me, you've been talking with people for seven hours," Harry joked. "I honestly couldn't say. I hope it's both, but I'd really be the least qualified person to answer that. I'm just happy for the support."

"The only reaction I got from most people today about you other than support was a general nervousness that more violence might come to Hogwarts, such as happened this morning. Are you concerned about this?"

"Yes, I am. I know it could happen. I hope it doesn't. I do know that Hogwarts is a very secure place, and it couldn't be in better hands than Professor Dumbledore's. Especially after this morning," he involuntarily glanced at Hermione, "I know that what I'm doing could bring danger to Hogwarts that otherwise wouldn't

have come. But the problem is, nobody fights Voldemort because they're afraid of the danger, and that makes him stronger. Somebody has to do this, and it just happens to be me, and I happen to be at Hogwarts."

"Some parents would say, 'I appreciate what he's trying to do, but he could be putting my children in danger.' What would you say to that?"

Harry paused. "I think that's the toughest question you could ask me. I don't deny the possibility. But, thinking about what you just asked a minute ago, I think a big part of the reason that so many people support me must be that they feel that what I'm doing is right. If they thought the effort wasn't worth the danger, I'm sure I'd be hearing that from people. So far, I haven't. As I think I said before, we can't fight Voldemort if we can't say his name, and no one else is. If someone else was, I wouldn't have to. But I'm very sure we do have to. I've never been so sure of anything."

"Harry, the other teachers expressed virtually unanimous support for you, and their admiration. The only exception was Professor Severus Snape, who would not comment, on this or anything else. Why do you think that is?"

Harry paused again. "I think it's probably best that if he didn't comment on me, then I shouldn't comment on him."

"Some other sixth years have told me that he's been unusually harsh on you, singling you out for criticism, and worse. Is that true?"

"I'm sorry, Hugo, but again, I'm not going to say anything about that."

Hugo nodded. "Okay, I understand. Would it surprise you to learn that, unfairly using my intuitive sense today, I discovered quite a bit of female interest in you?" Ron, Hermione, and Ginny all burst out laughing. Harry gave them a humorously annoyed look as Hugo chuckled at the scene. "Well, you did ask if they could sit in," he observed.

"They're laughing because they know that I'll be embarrassed, of course," said Harry. "But, yes, it surprises me. I'm not sure I'd believe you if you didn't have that sense of yours."

"Well, then, Harry, would it surprise you to learn that when I used the phrase 'quite a bit of female interest,' I was understating the case, to spare you embarrassment?" Ron, Ginny, and Hermione broke up again.

"Yes, Hugo, that would surprise me even more. I see you decided not to spare me the embarrassment in order to give my friends a good laugh. That was very nice of you," Harry replied, his sarcasm fairly apparent from his tone.

"So, the obvious question is, why don't you have a girlfriend?" asked Hugo.

Harry thought about not answering, but decided to try after all; he wasn't sure why he did. "Well, there was someone I was interested in last year, but it didn't

work out. But to be honest, I'm just not sure I can think about having a girlfriend right now."

Hugo stared at him, seeming to temporarily abandon his role as interviewer. "You're scared..." he said softly, with compassion. "You're afraid of what could happen... either to her because of you, or to you and how it would affect her. That's why you won't do it." He looked deeply affected. Ron, Ginny, and Hermione were silent, somber.

Harry nodded. "I have a huge target on my head, all over me. It's bad enough that my friends are exposed to the danger that I attract. If I had a girlfriend, it would be even worse. I don't know if I could deal with that."

"But Harry," said Ginny, ignoring Hugo's request that she and the others not interrupt, "if you had a girlfriend, she would know all this, and want to be with you anyway. She would want to help you, she wouldn't care about the danger."

Harry looked at her. "Maybe you're right. Goodness knows you three are like that. Maybe she could deal with it, but I couldn't. I couldn't possibly enjoy having a girlfriend. I'd be constantly worrying. Maybe she wouldn't want me to, but I would. I know that. Of course, I'd like to have one. But I just don't think I could do that right now. You saw what I was like today, you saw what I went through with Hermione..." He trailed off.

"I'm very sorry, Harry," said Hugo, sincerely. "I can't imagine what that must feel like." He got up. "I've really enjoyed meeting you, Harry. All of you." He started to leave, then paused. "There are a couple of things I picked up from people that I thought you should know. Draco Malfoy... a few said the same things he did about you, but their hearts weren't really in it, not like Malfoy's is. He loathes you. He's so filled with hate, it was disturbing to talk to him. He said horrible things about you, but his true feelings are worse, Harry. I think if he thought he could kill you and get away with it, he would. I'm going to tell Professor Dumbledore the same thing. You need to watch out.

"Now, Pansy Parkinson, the Slytherin prefect... this was the strange one. She said some pretty nasty things about you, Harry, but she didn't mean them. In fact, I got the sense that she likes you, admires you, and that she only said what she said because it was what she wanted other Slytherins to hear. She was hoping I would print what she said, so they would read it. I see from your faces that this is highly useful information, but also is connected to something you'd like to keep secret... ah, I see. Don't worry, I'm not going to tell anyone. She's disgusted with Malfoy, Harry, and wants to help you. Normally I don't go around telling people things I got from other people by using my ability, but with Parkinson, I think this is something she actively wants you to know, and with Malfoy, I want you to be on your guard."

"Thanks, Hugo," said Harry. "By the way, did you ever think about being an intelligence agent?"

Hugo smiled. "I did, actually, but I realized it would be too stressful. I like being a journalist better. Well, I'd better get going, I need to do my article in time for the Sunday Prophet, tomorrow."

Hermione was surprised. "That soon?"

"I write fast," Hugo replied. "Thanks again, you all. See you 'round." He left.

"So, what about Parkinson?" Ron asked. "Looks like you were right, Harry. Boy, I never would have thought it."

"I wouldn't believe it if Hugo hadn't said it," said Hermione. "We still have to be careful, though. She could change her mind, nobody can know that she won't."

"But I have to take her more seriously now," said Harry. "I'm going to see if I can find a way to talk to her."

"Give her detention," Ginny suggested.

"Well, there kind of has to be a reason," Ron pointed out. "Also, McGonagall is doing Harry's detentions."

"Couldn't he give her a few detentions, schedule them for the same time as Malfoy's, and say that Harry'll do them so Malfoy and Parkinson don't get to do them together?" asked Hermione.

"That could work," agreed Ron. "Say, Harry, you don't suppose she's one of the ones that's keen on you, do you?" He grinned wickedly.

"Don't say that," Harry said fervently. "Besides, maybe they won't think that anymore after they read what I said about not wanting a girlfriend."

Hermione laughed out loud. "Are you kidding, Harry? It'll make them want you more than ever. They'll feel like, you'd overcome your fear if you could see how much they love you. If something is unobtainable, people want it more."

"That's it, Hermione," teased Ron. "Buck him up, lift his spirits."

"It's true," she said defensively. "Sorry, Harry."

Harry sighed, but said nothing.

"I assume everyone noticed that what Hugo said backed up what Parkinson said, that Malfoy actually wants to kill Harry," Ron noted. "We'd be stupid not to assume he knows how to do a Killing Curse. He's not going to do it in the crowded hallways, though. Only if he gets Harry alone. I think we'd better start thinking about how vulnerable we are at any time, because something could happen like happened to Hermione. We're going to want to use the Marauder's Map a lot more. We can't just walk around the school like nothing could happen to us."

"Ron's right," agreed Hermione. Ron raised his eyebrows, as though those were not words he heard often. "We have to be careful, especially in terms of Harry and his safety. Not only from Malfoy, but any other Slytherin spy."

"How will we handle this, though? We all know how Harry doesn't like to be protected," Ron said humorously, as though Harry were not there.

"He'll have to deal with it," said Hermione in the same vein.

"It's nice to be a part of the decision-making process," commented Harry. "Do let me know what you decide, won't you?"

"You'll be the fourth to know," Ron assured him.

"C'mon, let's go get some dinner, I think it's time," suggested Ginny. They got up and started to leave the classroom, but as soon as they stepped out of the classroom, they saw Pansy Parkinson approaching from down the hall. Harry quickly said to Ron, "You've still got the Map, haven't you?" Ron nodded. "Could you stay in the classroom, keep your eyes open?" he asked, as Parkinson walked up to them. Ron nodded again.

Parkinson glanced at all of them, then Harry again. "I assume they all know?"

Harry nodded. "Let's go into the office," he said. They walked into the teacher's office, while Ron, Hermione, and Ginny sat back down in the classroom.

Harry sat down at his desk and gestured Pansy to the other chair. Fawkes was still on his shoulder; Harry marveled at how he could forget Fawkes was there for long periods of time. "Well, I want you to know first that I've gone from 'I want to believe you,' to 'I believe you.'" He gave her a small grin, which she returned.

"Thank you," she said, sincerely. "What made you decide?"

"I had kind of already decided. I just really felt like you were telling the truth. But I just had my last conversation with Hugo before he wrote the article. He said that you said nasty things about me, but you didn't mean them, that in fact you liked and admired me." He couldn't help but smile now, at her embarrassment.

"He's pretty amazing," Pansy said. "I just got the feeling that he was looking right through me. I put on an act, but I didn't think he believed it. What else did he say?"

"That he could tell you were really hoping he'd print what you said, that you wanted the other Slytherins to know you'd said it."

"Amazing," she repeated. "Yeah, I did the usual stuff about how you have to be the center of attention, because you're the Boy Who Lived, that sort of thing."

"I'll try not to be too offended," he said.

"Are we safe here?" she asked.

Harry nodded. "The others are keeping an eye out. And in the worst case, if we were found, there's nothing so overly suspicious. I'll say I wanted to have a chat with you about your attitude."

She looked amused. "Which would be true, really."

"Pansy, can I ask you something?" She nodded. "I'm not trying to be critical, I'd just really like to know. What is it about Malfoy that you like, or liked, before he got like he is now?"

She considered his question. "He's very confident; I think people find that appealing. He acts like he's born to command. And he comes from a wealthy and powerful family, I guess that doesn't hurt."

"And it didn't bother you that being nasty to people was a part of that?"

She gave him a glance, as if to assure herself that he was sincere in asking, then thought again. "All I can think is that it's easier to ignore it when you're the one doing it, or your friends. You think it's justified somehow. But it started bothering me last year, I'm not even sure why. I tried to ignore it, but it wouldn't go away. This year, I've been acting like I usually do, but my heart hasn't been in it, to say the least."

"I think what made me go looking for you," she said unprompted, as if she wanted to get this off her chest, "was what you're doing with the Dark Lord. I know you want me to say his name, but I can't. Not now. I've heard about the Curse, I know that it's horrible beyond words. That you would face it voluntarily... it's just an act of bravery that I can barely understand. That, combined with Draco's attitude, just made it crystal clear to me just how... bankrupt I was, what I was doing was. Laughing at his jokes, hanging out with him... it just seemed so stupid. You're trying to get people not to be afraid of the Dark Lord, and he's obsessed with you being a teacher and wanting to hurt you. I just had enough. You can use all the help you can get."

"That's for sure," he agreed. "But you seem to be doing it undercover, and like I said, I'm not sure that's a good idea. You could still do a lot of good by steering away from Malfoy gently, or trying to talk him down from where he is now."

She looked at him as if trying to figure out what made him tick. "I heard that you felt very bad for what happened to Hermione, that you felt responsible. Would you feel responsible if I did this for you and something happened to me?"

"Of course," he said, surprised that she should have to ask. He continued, feeling as though she had shared a confidence, and that he should too. "I talked to Professor Dumbledore about it. He said that you're not a good leader if you don't feel this way, that it's part of the price of leadership. Hermione and the others wouldn't risk their lives for me if they thought I was going to be careless with them."

But I don't feel this way because I want them to risk their lives for me. They risk their lives for me because I feel this way. If you see what I mean. It's very, very serious. I would feel that way about anybody, you included, who had placed any trust in me, put themselves in danger for me. I couldn't feel any other way."

She stared at him for a moment. "Sorry, that kind of thinking just seems... unfamiliar to me. I can understand it, but... Draco would laugh at it. His attitude would be, well, if they get hurt, then they didn't do their jobs well enough."

"And that's why, I'm very sure, nobody in Slytherin would ever risk their life for Malfoy," said Harry.

"That's for sure," she agreed. "Well, then again, Crabbe and Goyle might, since they might be too stupid to know that they were doing it."

He chuckled. "Are they really as stupid as they seem? I never hear them talk, so I'm not sure."

"To tell you the truth, I haven't heard them talk much more than you have. They laugh at his jokes, mainly. Of course, that's what I did, too."

"Well, fun as it is to sit around making jokes about Crabbe and Goyle, since that was one of the things I didn't like about you, I shouldn't do it too."

"I'm going to have to still do it, you know. It'll look too strange to the others if I don't."

Harry looked at her seriously. "Are you really sure you want to do it this way?"

She smiled again at his concern. "I know how things work in Slytherin, I can take care of myself. I won't do anything stupid."

"Yeah, but you'll still have to sit there and agree with Malfoy and laugh at his jokes, which you really don't want to do anymore."

"Yes," she agreed, "but now I'll be doing it for a reason, one I can be proud of instead of ashamed of."

He nodded; he could understand that. "Pansy, could you tell me what's going on in Slytherin these days? Is Malfoy still as powerful as he was, or are people going to abandon him because he lost his badge? I mean, even in fourth year, he had power and influence even when he didn't have a badge. How does that work?"

She thought for a moment. "It's still kind of early to tell. Draco's influence doesn't come from his badge so much, but from his personality and his family's power. With his father in jail, that's taken a dive, but I think he's trying to use fear instead now. Now that everybody knows his father's a Death Eater, he wants Slytherins to think he has some influence with the Dark Lord through his father, so they'll fear him. He wants them to think that if they cross him, the Dark Lord will get them. He hasn't had to make many threats; students younger than him are so used to being cowed by him that they never make waves. It's only you and the first

years that have changed things. The first years hadn't learned yet that they should kowtow to Draco. They loved your lesson; you told them not to kowtow to him, so they didn't. He couldn't believe it. And what hurt him worse was that it wasn't just one or two, it was all ten. He usually just makes an example of one or two, and the rest fall in line. He couldn't make an example of all ten. He cursed one, but the others didn't budge..."

Harry couldn't help but smile with pride and interrupt. "I taught them that. I told them they had to hang tough to win, but they could. It's a little like my situation with Voldemort. He's trying to make an example of me, to get everyone cowed. But if I can hang in there and, you know, not be killed, then that's a victory right there."

She shook her head in wonder. "Anyway, Draco had a feeling you were responsible, and that just made him madder at you. But by then, your second and third years had had their lessons, liked them, and they saw what the first years were doing, and it was like they realized that they could do it too. They're not quite as bold as the first years, but I think they'll be sticking it to Draco pretty soon. I think the others will be waking up soon, too, if they haven't already. I heard the fifth years all bailed on him. So, I think Draco's power is falling apart, but it's only beginning to. Maybe the rest will happen this week. Having to do all those detentions means less time in the Slytherin common room to make sure people aren't saying things about him. So, that's good."

"I did warn him," Harry said. "I'm still amazed that he did it anyway."

"Like I said, he's just losing it. He can't deal with what's happened. When he sees that article tomorrow, he'll go berserk. He'll get himself expelled if he's not careful."

"I was thinking, Pansy, we should have some kind of way of getting in contact if one of us needs to talk to the other. Obviously we can't if either of us is in our dormitories, but that shouldn't be urgent. I'll try to work out something for emergency situations. I was thinking, if you want to talk to me, you should insult me when you see me... unless there are teachers around, then you really would get detention."

"Besides, I'll have to insult you from time to time anyway, just so Draco doesn't get suspicious." She shrugged in apology.

He shrugged in indifference. "I'm kind of used to it. But maybe then we should make it a specific insult, one that'll signal me that you want to talk. Any ideas?"

"How about something about your scar?"

"Nah, there isn't anything really to say about my scar, except that it's ugly or something. Not one of Malfoy's better insults. How about something about dementors?"

"Oh, you mean from third year, when you were fainting? Why were you fainting, anyway?"

Harry decided to share another confidence, since it wasn't anything that could hurt them if it got out. He wanted her to feel comfortable with him. He looked her in the eyes and said, "When dementors get close to me, I see my mother and father being killed."

She gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. "Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry... I had no idea, and I kept making fun of you..." She looked distraught.

"Don't worry about it, Pansy. You're not that person anymore," he said earnestly. "Really, don't worry about it."

"I know, I just feel so stupid. I don't think I want to use dementors as a signal."

"Okay, how about this," Harry suggested. "You just call me 'Professor Potter' in a really snide voice. And if I want to talk to you... well, I can't insult you, I'm a teacher...I'll just stare at you, as if you've done something wrong. Then we'll try to meet in the Defense Against the Dark Arts room as soon as we can. If it's really an emergency, just go to Professors McGonagall or Dumbledore, tell them you need to see me."

As he was talking, she had started petting Fawkes. "He's so beautiful, and his feathers are so soft..." Like Harry yesterday, she was having trouble stopping.

"You did get what I said, right?" Harry asked.

"'Professor Potter' snide, you stare at me, Dark Arts classroom, emergency go to McGonagall or Dumbledore. I was listening," she said, a bit defensively. She stopped petting Fawkes.

"I didn't mean that you weren't, it's just that Fawkes can be pretty mesmerizing. I just wanted to be sure."

"Harry... I want to ask you something, and I'm sure that people have asked you this, but if you could tell me..." He nodded, gesturing for her to continue.

"I overheard a few Gryffindor first years telling someone about hearing you scream, both nights. They were pretty vivid descriptions, and knowing about the Curse, I'm sure they were accurate." She shook her head. "I couldn't do what you're doing, I just couldn't. I know it. I really want to know how you do it. I don't mean why, I know why. I mean how." She stared at him earnestly.

He kept eye contact with her for a few seconds, thinking. "Honestly, I'm not sure that I could tell you. In a case like this, I treat it as something that has to happen, that I have no choice about, since giving in is unthinkable. And if you have no choice, there's just nothing to do but deal with it when it happens."

"Also, there's them," he said, gesturing to the classroom in which Ron, Hermione, and Ginny sat. "They care about me, they would do anything they could for me; they have, many times. You can't imagine what a source of strength that is. One thing I know for sure, I couldn't do this without them. This is where Voldemort is weak, this is what he doesn't understand. Love and friendship are powerful, and he doesn't understand them at all. I mean, look at what almost killed him; the protection my mother gave me, by dying and with her love. He didn't understand it, he still doesn't."

"But that's the best answer I can think of to your question. You say you couldn't do it, but maybe you could if your situation was different. You can't know."

She appeared to be fighting back tears, but Harry wasn't sure. After a moment, she asked, "He really doesn't understand why you're doing this? What does he say in the dreams?"

Harry was surprised this hadn't gotten back to her, or maybe she just wanted to hear it directly from him. He related a lot of what had happened in both dreams. Her eyes got very wide when he had reached the end of the second one.

"Oh, my... I can't believe you mocked him like that... why in the world...?"

"Like I said, he can't threaten me any worse than he has. I want him underestimating me, I want him mad at me, so mad he won't think straight. He was so mad that he sent Nott after me right away last night, so obviously what I've done has been a good idea."

She was amazed again. "Leave it to you to think of a murder attempt as a good thing. I understand what you mean, but still..." She paused, thinking.

"You know what I feel like, Harry? I feel like I just heard music for the first time, or just had chocolate for the first time. It's like, there's this whole other thing that I never knew existed, and it's just amazing. I can't do what you're doing, but I can try to keep you safe while you do it, and I will."

"I suppose I should go before I'm missed for too long. I'll look for you if there's something I need to tell you."

"Pansy... thank you for doing this. It really helps. It could save my life, I don't know. But even if it ends up doing nothing practical... it still helps, believe me."

She smiled, and they left the office, stepping into the classroom. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny stood. Pansy walked up to them and faced them.

She took a deep breath before speaking. "I want to help you. I want to help him, what little I can, doing what he's doing. I know he believes me. I hope you will too. And I want to apologize to you, for how I've treated you in the past... especially you, Hermione, I've been extra nasty to you, and I'm sorry about that. I've acted like an idiot. You don't deserve it."

Hermione's face, stony at first, melted a bit, and then she did something that greatly surprised Harry. She raised her hand as high as she could, straining to go higher, mocking herself as she appeared in class at times, desperate for the teacher to call on her. Pansy, Harry, Ron, and Ginny all broke up laughing.

Pansy smiled at Hermione. "Thank you, Hermione. I appreciate that. But I still shouldn't have done it. If I need to give him a message and I can't find him, I'll give it to one of you instead. I'm sorry I have to treat you like my normal stupid self in public. But like Harry says, I have to be careful." She looked briefly at all of them, then lingered on Harry for a few seconds. Then she turned and left.

Ron took out the Map and watched the dot move away, then he looked at Harry, as the others were doing. "Let me tell you, mate," he said to Harry, "Hermione says I'm clueless, and she may be right... but I don't have to be Hugo to understand that last look she gave you."

Ginny nodded. "It was pretty revealing, that's for sure."

Harry was puzzled. "What, are you saying she does fancy me?"

Hermione shook her head. "It's more than that, Harry. It's like... she's never met anyone like you before, and she's amazed. She wants to think that one day she'll be worthy of someone like you, like something to aspire to."

"I also got the feeling that she really wants to prove herself, to do something that's really helpful," Ginny added. "But, yes, you look pretty good to her right now."

"Spending all that time with Malfoy, anyone who's not a power-hungry bully is going to look pretty good," said Harry.

Hermione sighed. "Harry, come to dinner with us, and I'll tell you about how annoying it is for us when you put yourself down like that." They headed out the door.

"I don't mind it when he does that," said Ron.

"Shut up, Ron," replied Hermione.

Chapter 12

The Sunday Prophet

Harry soared high into the atmosphere on his broom. Higher and higher he flew, until he could no longer see sky, only stars. He knew he shouldn't be able to breathe, but he could. He wondered where he should go. He could go anywhere, he could go as fast as he wanted. He gripped his Firebolt tightly...

...and he was back in the graveyard. He looked around, and almost by reflex, started thinking about love. He tried to bask in it, in the joy of it. He knew that nothing compared to it. It gave him strength as he waited for Voldemort.

Voldemort popped into view. He looked almost as angry as he had at the end of the previous night's dream. "Well, Potter, are you ready to give in yet? You will, eventually, you know that... why suffer unnecessarily? Now tell me, when talking about me, how should you refer to me?"

Harry looked somber. "Tom Riddle... you used to be called Tom Riddle. Do you remember him? Whatever happened to him?"

Voldemort glared at Harry. "I am not here to discuss history, Potter."

"But he must still be there, somewhere. You can't have totally killed him. I met him once. He could have been a nice person, if things had gone differently for him."

Voldemort sneered. "What do you know of Tom Riddle? Or of me, for that matter?"

"I know he was once a human being," Harry said, focusing on love, on caring. "I know he had feelings, a heart, the same things that all humans do. But he hurt so much that he started letting you in, and before he knew it, you had taken over. He was gone, or at least, pushed far, far back in your mind."

"He was a fool, Potter. Not as much of a fool as you, but still a fool. He was weak. But he was smart enough to let me in. I showed him how to be strong, to eliminate his weaknesses. But he still couldn't do it. I had to take over, and he was happy to let me. But there is still some of him in me; the strong parts. The weak parts are gone, as they should be. Now, why do you care, Potter?"

"Because, Voldemort, what you call the weak parts are what make us human. Without them, we're just you-evil, single-mindedly focused on power. There is so much more to life than power. I feel sorry for Riddle for having lost that, and for you, for not understanding it."

Voldemort just stared, so flabbergasted was he. His expression changed; now he looked more dangerous than he ever had before. Think about love, Harry reminded himself. Come from a place of love. Listen to the phoenix song.

"I had not realized that you were this stupid, Potter. Perhaps I am wasting my time talking to you, but you still must be punished. It is you who does not understand, that there is nothing other than power."

Harry looked at him with what was now approaching real pity. He shook his head sadly. "No, there is. You just can't see that it's there, because you're not human. If you were human, you'd know. That's why you can't beat us, because you don't understand us. I've learned that there is nothing stronger than love. There's nothing better. If you don't understand that, then I really do pity you." Harry mentally luxuriated in a sea of love.

Voldemort looked like he would explode. "Crucio!" he screamed.

Harry was screaming again, the pain overwhelming him. But he found that he was able to think, to his great surprise. I have to wake up, I have to wake up, he thought. He felt himself being shaken, being grabbed. He flung his arms out, grabbed ahold of whatever was there, and the world came back into view.

He looked ahead and saw the extremely concerned faces of Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Professor Dumbledore, so he deduced that it was Hermione he was holding. He gasped for breath, and after a minute, pulled back a bit to see her face. She gave him a pained smile and ran her hand through his hair a couple of times. He gave her the best smile he could, and fell back into her arms, his head resting on her shoulder. She squeezed him tightly. Fawkes was singing, having resumed as soon as he had delivered Dumbledore.

The others watched, silent, as Harry hung onto Hermione for a few minutes. Finally he said, "That one wasn't as bad as the others, somehow. I think I'm getting somewhere."

Ron scoffed. "I'd say 'not as bad' is a relative term, mate. Looked pretty bad to me."

"I noticed it too, Harry," agreed Dumbledore. "Very minor, a very small difference in the quality of what you suffered. It was perhaps at 90% intensity. Still horribly painful, of course, but it is something to work with."

"So how long do you think it's going to go on?" asked Ron impatiently.

"C'mon, Ron, you know he doesn't know," said Ginny quietly.

Ron looked apologetic. "I know, I know, I just hate to keep seeing him like this."

"No more than I do, Ron, I assure you," said Dumbledore. "But Harry knows this, he knew it when he started. It will take as long as it takes. We are doing our best to see that it is over as quickly as possible."

Just then, the dormitory door opened, and five first year boys ran into the room. "Professor! Are you okay?" asked Eric as they crowded around his bed. Ron and Ginny looked a bit annoyed, but Dumbledore smiled.

Seeing Ron and Ginny's expressions, Harry looked at them over Hermione's shoulder and said, "Well, they do get woken up, seems only fair that they should get to come in if they want." Still holding onto Hermione, Harry leaned over and patted the shoulder of the closest one. "I'm okay, Eric, everyone, thanks. I just need to be held for awhile, and then it's okay."

"We know," said a boy named Brian. "Some of the girls were saying they'd like to be the ones doing it." The boys all giggled; Ron, Ginny, and Hermione laughed. "See, Harry?" said Hermione, patting Harry on the back. "I've got the best spot in Gryffindor Tower." Harry couldn't help but smile.

Dumbledore stood. "I'm sorry, boys, but I must ask you to leave now. Harry will be all right, and there are things that must be discussed privately. I suggest you return to your dormitory before Professor McGonagall finds you out of bounds." This was said with a smile, so the boys knew he was not reprimanding them. They nodded and filed out.

"Harry, I have brought this with me tonight. I thought it might help to have a different perspective, and Professor Snape can make more detailed observations," said Dumbledore, moving aside to reveal his Pensieve. "If you do not mind doing it this way, I can help you put your memories into it. Then you, Professors Snape and McGonagall, and I can view it, and form impressions."

Harry nodded, moving a bit away from Hermione but keeping an arm around her shoulders. "I don't mind, but them, too," he said.

"I am concerned that it may be too intense for them, Harry. They have never seen Voldemort before; it could be rather distressing."

"They can come if they want to. If they don't want to, they don't have to," Harry said in a tone that suggested that he would brook no argument.

"Well, I'm coming," said Hermione firmly. "If he can live through these things, the least I can do is see them, so I know what he's going through." Ron and Ginny nodded their agreement. When Harry looked at Neville, Neville looked a bit surprised. "You mean, me, too?"

"If you want to, Neville," Harry said. Neville gulped but nodded. Harry had a feeling that Neville was doing it for the same reason that he ran into the room at the Department of Mysteries.

Dumbledore nodded as if he had expected this, which, Harry realized, he probably had. "Very well, let me help you with this." He moved the Pensieve beside the bed, on a rolling stand he had conjured. "Take out your wand, and focus on the events you wish to place into the Pensieve. In your mind, shift them from your mind to your wand. Imagine them as the silver threads you have seen me use. When you see the threads, simply move your wand to the surface of the Pensieve." Harry did so. "Now, do you recall the dream?" Dumbledore asked.

"Very faintly," Harry replied. "Like it was something that happened a long time ago."

"Good, that is as it should be. Your memories will return in full force, of course, when you empty the Pensieve. I will ask Fawkes to bring Professors Snape and McGonagall." They were there in a very short time. "Now, everyone please surround the Pensieve. It will only be necessary to put a finger into it."

"They are coming too?" asked McGonagall.

"Harry was most insistent," explained Dumbledore.

She looked at them and shook her head. "Don't say you weren't warned, this will not be pleasant."

Ron looked at her aggressively. "It hasn't been for Harry, either. We have to do this, Professor. You must know that."

She looked almost amused by his fervor. "Very well, Mr. Weasley."

"Everyone put their finger in.... now," said Dumbledore. Eight fingers broke the surface of the bowl.

Harry's world spun, and in a moment he was standing in the graveyard, in a group of eight. "Harry, this graveyard... this is where he came back?" asked Ginny. Harry nodded.

Suddenly Voldemort popped into view. Harry and the professors didn't react, but the others all flinched. Ginny, standing next to Harry, buried her head in his chest for a second. Harry patted her shoulder in reassurance. The others watched, transfixed, as Harry and Voldemort talked. Harry, the Harry that was watching, looked around at other details. He could hear phoenix song in the background. The horizon was dark and indistinct. Harry focused on Voldemort's appearance and expressions; he saw details about how they changed throughout the conversation. Ginny clung to Harry in sympathy as she watched.

The dream stopped a couple of seconds after Harry was hit by the Curse, which caused Harry's friends to flinch again. They were in an empty graveyard. Ginny put an arm around Harry. "You were amazing, Harry," Hermione said softly. "I don't know how you did that, stayed calm like that."

"I want this to be over," Harry said simply. "I have to focus on doing whatever I can to make that happen. It's a big motivator."

"I now must ask the four of you to exit the Pensieve," said Dumbledore. "I would like to see it again, and discuss sensitive matters with the other three professors. You can leave by concentrating on your true body, and moving your finger out of the bowl." In a moment, all four were gone.

"Thoughts?" Dumbledore asked nobody in particular.

"Quite effective," said Snape, surprising Harry. "You could not have done better, Professor Potter. How much of what you said was rehearsed?"

"Umm... I was going to try to mention Tom Riddle, and he gave me just the right opening for it. Other than that, nothing I said was rehearsed."

"It appears, then," said Snape, "that your... intuition was in fine form. He was confused and furious, which is desirable. There is enough truth in what you said to make him uncomfortable, your pity obviously sincere, your calm perfect. He is used to people being in abject terror at his presence. The headmaster is the only one I know of who could have put on such a performance. You did as well as he could have done."

Harry was stunned at such praise. "Thank you, Professor. That's quite a compliment."

Snape gave Harry an annoyed glance. "It was not a compliment, Professor. It was a statement of fact."

Harry had a half-smile on his face. "No, Professor, it was a compliment. You just didn't mean it as one." Snape did not reply; Dumbledore chuckled.

"Yes, Harry," said Dumbledore, "it was quite inspired. I was particularly impressed that you were able to remain calm at just the moment you knew you were going to be Cursed. Your concentration did not waver. I suspect that most people could not have done that. I was also fascinated at your choice to highlight the dichotomy between Voldemort and Tom Riddle. What gave you the idea to do that?"

"I got the idea, I think, from that conversation we had when you asked me to be the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher," Harry replied. "At one point, you said something like, it was as if he had been taken over by evil, and Tom Riddle was lost. I didn't know if you meant it literally, but when I asked what happened to Riddle, I realized that Tom Riddle was probably very different from Voldemort, in certain ways, at least. So it seemed reasonable to think of them as two separate people. I couldn't help but be saddened at the thought of the good parts of Tom Riddle being gone."

"Most impressive," mused Dumbledore. "So, Severus, Minerva, did you notice anything else about this dream? We should see it again before you answer." With a thought, Dumbledore caused the dream to replay.

"Did you notice that the sky got a bit brighter near the end?" asked McGonagall. "It was as if the sun was coming up, or from behind clouds."

"Does that mean what I think it means, Severus?"

"I believe so, but only Professor Potter can know for sure," replied Snape.

"Know what?" asked Harry, confused.

"Harry, what was your mental state, especially near the end?" asked Dumbledore.

"I was pretty focused. As soon as the dream started, I was focusing on love, trying to feel feelings of love. Somehow I was able to keep doing it even after Voldemort showed up. I don't think I ever got angry or annoyed or anything else, just focused on love. I seem to be getting better at that. Kind of like the Summoning Charm."

"Quite so," Dumbledore agreed. "We think, Harry, that the fact that the sky became brighter near the end was due to a combination of your intense focus on love, and Voldemort's fatigue. Your Occlumency skills are improving, so it is harder for him to break into your mind, and then he is faced with an atmosphere of love, which is

very distressing to him. I believe this caused the Curse to be delivered with less than full intensity, and in the following nights, can be improved upon. I am now optimistic about your chances to keep him out or drive him out, perhaps as soon as the next few days."

"That would be nice," Harry affirmed. "I'll be happy for this to be over."

"Well, Harry, I can suggest no more for tomorrow than to continue in the same vein as today. If you keep calm and composed, focusing on love and not being distracted, I am sure you will achieve more success," said Dumbledore.

"I understand, Professor," Harry said.

The professors started to exit the Pensieve, and Harry did so, too. When Harry returned to the room, Fawkes had already delivered Snape back to his quarters. Before Dumbledore could start to leave, Harry asked, "Sir, would you mind if that was kept here for the rest of the morning? I'd like to be able to review the other dreams in the same way, see if I can notice anything."

McGonagall looked as though she was about to object, but Dumbledore said, "Of course, Harry, I understand. I will return at about 8:00 to collect it. That should give you enough time." He escorted a slightly discomfited-looking McGonagall out of the dormitory.

"So, was Voldemort anything like what you expected?" asked Harry, of everyone.

"Kind of worse, really," said Ron, a bit pale. "Just... total evil."

Neville was looking at Harry with awe. "I was really scared of him, Harry, and I wasn't even in the dream. I can't believe you were so calm. I saw it, but I can't believe it."

"Well, I've met him several times now. I sort of know what to expect."

"You know what to expect from the Cruciatus Curse, too, but it still hurts," replied Neville, obviously no less impressed.

"Harry," Hermione asked, "did you ask for that to be kept here for the reason I think you did?"

Harry nodded. "If you're interested."

"What are you talking about?" asked Ron.

"Harry wants to be able to show us some of his memories, presumably ones of events that we weren't around for."

"I'd like to see even the ones you were around for," Ginny piped up.

"The one I was thinking about, of course, was Voldemort's return," said Harry.

"You could show us that?" Ron asked. "Yeah, I really would like to see it, if... well, it was really hard for you. I thought it might be too private."

"Not too private for you. After all, you're all my close friends. I know that because you'll be reading about it in the Sunday Prophet in the next few hours," Harry joked.

Ron, in a decent impression of Professor Trelawney's voice, said, "Yes, the fates have decreed it." The others laughed.

"So, does everyone want to see it? It is a bit intense, I should warn you."

Everybody nodded, even Neville, who Harry had thought might back out.

"Professor Dumbledore didn't leave it here with this in mind, Harry," pointed out Hermione. "I mean, I want to see it, but-"

"He knew what I would do, Hermione. McGonagall was going to object, but he cut her off. He could easily have taken this back. He wants me to be able to show you."

"Okay, then." agreed Hermione.

"Now, I'm going to start this at a point near the center of the Triwizard maze," Harry explained. "Cedric and I are near the center, going for the Cup. If I do this right, it should start around when the spider attacks Cedric." He started applying his wand to his head and imagining the strands of thought, which he deposited into the bowl. When he could barely recall the episode, he figured he was done. "Okay, it's ready. Remember, if you want to get out, you can at any time."

"Why would I want to get out?" asked Neville defensively.

"I was talking to everyone, Neville, not only you."

"Oh. Well, okay then. I'm ready."

They all put their fingers into the Pensieve. The next thing Harry knew, he was in the middle of the Triwizard maze, watching himself, two years younger, warn Cedric about the giant spider, and help Cedric beat it. He recalled how, so often after the event, he wished he had taken the Cup alone, in which case Cedric would still be alive.

It took about thirty minutes for the event to play out. Harry saw quite a few terrified looks on their faces as they saw Cedric be killed, Voldemort rise, give a speech to his Death Eaters, toy with Harry, and finally duel with him. All had either been told by Harry what had happened or read his interview on the subject, but it seemed that seeing it was completely different. From Hermione's reactions, Harry would have thought she was not aware of what had happened. Finally it was over, and they left the Pensieve. They were quiet while Harry put his thoughts back. He looked at them, and couldn't help but smile. "See, Neville, if you'd seen that before the dream, you would've thought the dream wasn't so bad. At least I could wake up from the dream. Believe me, I wanted to wake up from that. Looking at it again, I'm still amazed that I got out of there alive."

"You're not wrong," Ron agreed fervently. "That thing with the wands... I still can't believe it, you were so lucky to have that happen."

"Like I said at the Hog's Head, I've had a fair bit of luck."

They next watched the confrontation with Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets, since only Harry had been present for the conclusion. Ginny had been there, but was unconscious most of the time. She was fascinated to watch, but unnerved to see herself lying in the Chamber. She held onto the real Harry while the younger Harry was fighting the basilisk, and was obviously furious when she heard Riddle gloat over how easy she'd been to deceive.

After they got out, she looked at Harry and said, "You never told me he said all that stuff."

"I didn't think you needed to hear him gloat, Ginny. It was hard enough on you already. And later on, I just never thought of it." Ginny muttered something Harry couldn't make out.

The time was already 6:30, and they had to eat breakfast, so it was decided not to view anything too long. Harry wanted to view the dreams again, as he had told Dumbledore he would, so they did. Harry couldn't find anything that he thought would help him, though. He moved the Pensieve off to one side, they talked about the dreams for a bit more, and then they walked down to breakfast.

Most everyone was already in the Great Hall eating their breakfast. A few people shouted, "What happened?" or "How about the dream?" Figuring it was better to do it like this than be pestered a few dozen times during the course of the meal, he decided to answer. He stopped walking and said loudly enough for most of the hall to hear, "Pretty similar to the other ones, really. Voldemort told me to stop doing this, I ignored him, he threatened me, I told him he obviously didn't understand why I was doing it, he got angry when I was disrespectful... and I think that not cowering is his idea of being disrespectful... then Cursed me again. But I think I'm making progress in fighting him off. I don't think he can do it too much longer."

"How much longer can you keep doing it?" asked an obviously concerned Hufflepuff.

"At least one day longer than he can, that's all I know for sure," Harry said firmly. Most of the Hall cheered; Harry smiled and sat down with his friends.

"It really is sad," Harry said as they started eating. "You saw what just happened there. It's you guys mostly, but them too, that keep me going. Voldemort just has no idea, no clue about what that means. I really do pity him for that."

Dozens of owls flew into the Hall with the morning's mail, including many copies of the Sunday Prophet. To Harry's surprise, an owl delivered one to him too; he assumed that Hugo had arranged to have him sent one. Ron and Neville looked at his,

while Ginny looked at Hermione's. They read in silence for a while, then people started making comments. Ginny said, "Oh, Harry, Mum's going to be floating when she reads this, you were very nice. Next time she sees you, there will not be an un-kissed spot on your face."

Neville had stopped reading suddenly, and looked up at Harry with a very emotional expression. "Thank you, Harry. You didn't mention that many people. I'm honored to be one of them." Harry nodded, appreciative of Neville's gratitude.

"I'm sure Lupin will appreciate being mentioned too, Harry," said Ron.

"I'm reading the main article; sounds like you two are reading the Harry interview," said Hermione. "It seems pretty fair. Of course it's favorable to Harry, but then again, the school supports Harry, so it should be that way to be accurate. Just a few minor quotes from Parkinson and her type to let people know that it's not unanimous, but pretty close. There's quotes from Ernie and Justin, supportive of course... and he quotes Cho too: 'I've known Harry for four years, since we started playing Quidditch against each other, and he's always been honorable, brave, and friendly. Also cute,' she said, smiling. 'I admire and totally support him, and what he's doing.' That was very nice of her. Funny, it doesn't mention-"

"I asked him not to," said Cho, having just walked up the aisle behind Hermione. Looking at Harry, she smiled and said, "I'd hate to be publicly known as the one who let you get away. Wouldn't be good for my reputation."

Harry got up; he found he wasn't anywhere near as uncomfortable around her as he'd been last year. "I wouldn't say it like that," he said. "It felt more like circumstances conspired to make it not happen."

"Could I talk to you for a minute?" she asked, gesturing him over to a wall, away from the tables, where they wouldn't be overheard. He nodded and followed her.

"I wanted to say a few things, Harry. One is that I'm sorry about how I acted a lot of the time last year. I couldn't separate my feelings about you from my feelings about Cedric, and I shouldn't have put you through that."

"Well, I wasn't too swift, either. I just had no idea how to act. I was too nervous all the time because of how much I liked you," he admitted. "You were the first girl I ever liked, like that, so I was kind of dumb." He smiled ruefully. "I wouldn't even know that; Hermione had to tell me."

"Thank you for saying that, Harry, that I was the first one you liked. That means something to me. I also read what you said about having a girlfriend, and I just started crying right at the table, it's so sad. But I made sure to stop before I came over, I think you've seen me cry more than enough."

"No, now that I'm not quite so confused, you can cry on me any time you want," Harry joked.

"Thanks. But what I wanted to say, about that, was... Harry, I don't think you've ever really been in love before, so you may not know this, but... no girl who loves you is going to care how big a target you are. Love doesn't work like that. I know what it's like to lose someone you love. But if you and I had worked, and if I was in love with you, I wouldn't have let that stop me. And if and when you fall in love with someone, maybe you'll want to stay away for her safety and yours, but you won't be able to. If you're in love, you won't care about risks or danger, you'll need that person. If you could put that person aside, for whatever reason, then you weren't really in love. I just thought you should know that."

Harry was silent for a moment. "I guess I don't know what to say to that," he admitted. "Maybe you're right. I just don't know. All I know is I don't want to put anyone else in danger."

"I know, and that's really wonderful. But I still think I'm right. So if I am, you can find me and say, 'Cho, you were right about what you said about love.'"

Wondering if she was right, he said, "If you are, I promise I will."

"Other than that, I just wanted to say the same kind of stuff that everyone's saying, about how I support you and how what you're doing is incredibly brave. If you ever want another person to talk to, about anything, feel free to come find me. I'd still like to be your friend."

He nodded. "Thank you, Cho. That means a lot to me. I'd like to be yours too."

"Well, I should get back to my table, finish reading the articles. But first..." She reached out to hug him, but slowly enough that he could politely back off if he chose. He smiled and returned the hug. "Of course, now people will start to talk again," she joked.

"They shouldn't, I've been doing a lot of hugging lately," Harry replied.

"Don't say that, I'll start crying again because of the reason you're doing it." She released him, quickly touched his face, whispered, "Take care of yourself," and turned and walked away.

Harry walked back to the table to see Hermione smiling. "See what I mean, Harry?" she said teasingly. "Even if something is unobtainable, girls will-"

"Oh, shut up," he said, in the same spirit. "She just wanted to make sure we're okay to still be friends, and to give me some advice." He repeated what she'd said about love.

"Well, she's right, of course," said Hermione, as if it were obvious. "I mean, I've never really been in love, so I can't speak from experience, but everything I've read suggests she's right. People say it's extremely powerful. You know that, you've

been using love against Voldemort. It's not romantic love, but it's the same idea. Romantic love is similar, but much more intense. You may not be able to help yourself."

Harry looked at Ginny. "Well, I already told you something similar, just from the girl's side of it," she pointed out. "But, yes, it makes sense to me, too."

Harry decided to have some fun. "What do you think, Ron?"

Ron looked slightly alarmed for a second, then saw Harry's expression. "Oh. Should've known you were just having fun with me. Harry, I think you should listen to what the girls say, and do whatever they tell you," he said, obviously joking.

"Why, Ron," said Hermione, affecting great surprise, "I hadn't realized your outlook was so advanced. Maybe you're husband material after all." Everyone except Ron laughed. "Anyway," she continued, "I finished the articles while you were talking to Cho, Harry. They seem fine. He spends a few paragraphs on the possible danger to Hogwarts, but it's not out of line, or exaggerated. Interestingly, Malfoy's not quoted at all. I guess it was considered too extreme a view."

"If I got the feelings off of Malfoy that Hugo said he did, I wouldn't print it either," agreed Ginny. "I'd try to leave out the obviously not at all well."

"You can say that again," said Justin, having just walked over, along with Ernie. "I ran into him yesterday, and he was three times worse than his usual self. Called me the usual Muggle-related stuff, asked how the Potter fan club was going, and said something about how I'd probably pay for the privilege of shining your shoes. Really weird stuff."

Harry scoffed. "That's stupid nonsense, Justin. Why, I'd let you shine my shoes for free." Everyone laughed. "Yeah, he does seem to be losing it, doesn't he?"

"The strange thing is," Justin continued, "he usually pretty much leaves me alone, except for the odd Muggle crack."

"Well, you are popular, after all," said Ernie. "He should leave you alone."

Justin rolled his eyes. "Ernie's been on me about this ever since we got the article."

"Yes, I saw that," said Hermione. To the others, she added, "Justin's described as a 'popular sixth year Hufflepuff,' while Ernie's just referred to as a 'Hufflepuff prefect.' Don't worry about it, Ernie, we're prefects. We're not supposed to be popular."

"I know," Ernie smiled. "I just don't find things to give Justin a hard time about that often. You guys must be having a blast at Harry's expense. Lots of good stuff in there."

"You'd think so, Ernie," said Ginny, "but I'm afraid the situation's a bit too grim for too much of that. You wake up every morning seeing the look on Harry's face when he's Cursed, and you're lucky if you don't cry the rest of the day."

"I guess that's something we don't have to think much about," admitted Ernie. "So, did Professor McGonagall give you a hard time about yesterday?"

"She needled me about it, made sure I knew she knew," said Harry. "That was about as much as she was going to do. It's kind of like when you're a kid, you get better treatment when you're sick. Not coming down on me for breaking certain rules is her way of being nice to me."

"Well, Harry," Justin said, "our way is to come over here every day until this ends and check up on you. Just to let you know we care." Ernie looked embarrassed, which caused Justin to smile.

"I appreciate it, both of you. Thanks," Harry said.

"No problem, Harry," Ernie said.

"And all those girls that like you, that the article mentioned," joked Justin, "If you don't need all of them, could you maybe send a few my way?"

"I wouldn't think you'd need them Justin," Harry replied. "You know, being so popular and all." Justin smiled, Ernie laughed. They walked away, Justin giving Harry's shoulder a pat as they passed.

"Hermione," asked Harry, "Will you be going to sleep once we're done here?"

"Yes, I thought I'd give it a try. Why?"

"Well, Ron mentioning Professor Lupin made me think, I thought it would be nice to write him a letter. Not that he needs me to tell him what's going on, now he can read it all in the Prophet, but I'd like to know what he thinks. Anyway, I thought I'd sit by your bed when you went to sleep, ask Fawkes to sing, and write the letter."

"Oh, Harry, you don't have to do that. I'm better off than I was at this time yesterday. Unlike you, I haven't been Cursed in the past twenty-four hours."

"I know I don't have to do it. I want to. Okay?"

"If you insist. Thank you."

"It's because of me that your sleep schedule is all weird, it's the least I can do. I'll take the Prophet, too, I haven't read the whole thing yet."

As Harry and Hermione got up, Ron said, "Remember, we have our first Quidditch practice at two."

Back in the dormitory, Harry pulled up a chair next to Hermione's bed. "You know, it's really nice, being able to do this," he said. "I wish you and Ginny could just stay here."

Hermione chuckled as she arranged herself in the bed. "Dream on, Harry." The she grimaced, and said, "Oh, sorry, that's probably not the best thing to say to you right now. But you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I do. It could never happen, and I know why. It's just very nice. It's so comfortable, having you and Ginny around all the time."

"I know what you mean. I've enjoyed it too. I'm not Parvati and Lavender's favorite person, nor are they mine. I'd like to stay, too. But obviously, I'll be happy to go back to my usual dormitory, because..."

"It'll mean this thing with me is over, I know. Me too, believe me."

They were quiet for a moment. Then Hermione said, "I really can't believe you were that calm with him, Harry. I could never have done that."

"You don't know that. You only couldn't do it now, because you haven't had the experiences I've had. Who's to say, if you had, maybe you'd be the one who did it, and I'd be here saying, wow, Hermione, I can't believe you did that. And you'd say, I just want the damn dreams to stop, Harry."

She chuckled at the improbability of the scenario. "I don't think so. I have my talents, but being calm hasn't always been one of them."

"Yes, and we all know how calm I was last year," he responded humorously. "No, I think the only reason I'm able to do this is because I absolutely have to-"

"That's different," she interrupted. "You've been emotional at times, but you've always been calm in crisis situations, which is really what this is."

Harry thought about that, and found it hard to deny. "Well, maybe, but in this case it's also because of this whole 'focusing on love' business. If you were in my position, Dumbledore would be telling you the same thing he's telling me, and I'm sure you could do it, probably better."

Hermione looked doubtful. "Maybe, maybe not... but that's not the same thing as being calm in the face of Voldemort, which I don't think I could do no matter how hard I focused on love. How are you doing with that, by the way? I mean, obviously pretty well, considering what I saw in the Pensieve, but how often do you try to do it, get feelings of love going like he suggested?"

"Pretty often," he answered. "Probably two or three times an hour since he suggested it yesterday, and I'll probably try to do it even more today, since we saw how well it worked this morning. This is obviously a powerful weapon, and my life could be at stake here, so I'm going to use it for all it's worth. From how he acts, I feel like to him it's as if there's this horrible smell, just revolting to him, and he has to do something difficult-keep the connection to my mind going-while having to smell this awful smell. That's a very encouraging thought, and I think it's true. So that gives

me even more motivation to keep doing this, not that I don't have enough motivation anyway."

He could see in her eyes how much she supported him, and he had a feeling that he knew what she would say before she said it. "I'm really glad it's working so well. You will beat him. I'm sure of that."

"I'm not quite that sure," he admitted, "but I am confident. And I appreciate your saying that. It helps." They were silent for a few seconds, then Harry thought of something he'd meant to ask her. "I just remembered, I was wondering if you could make more of those fake Galleons, or something like it. I want to set up something where I can communicate with my Slytherin first years, and Parkinson. Is it possible to use them to signal that you want to meet, or a signal, like warning or distress?"

She nodded. "I think so. You should find me after your Quidditch practice, I'm sure I'll be up by then. You can tell me exactly what you'd like to be able to do, and I'll do my best. It'll take a few days, I'll have to look stuff up. But I'm sure I can do it."

"Thanks. Well, I should stop talking, so you can get some sleep. Fawkes,-"

Fawkes started singing before Harry finished the sentence. "Guess the bonding is really kicking in. Thanks, Fawkes."

"Yes, thank you, Fawkes," added Hermione, looking very contented.

Harry smiled broadly. She saw it, and asked, "What?"

"You looked so comfortable. I was just remembering yesterday, after you fell asleep. I was watching you, and I realized I'd never watched anyone sleep before. There was something very nice about it."

"I'm glad, Harry. It's interesting... you probably had any number of chances to watch Ron sleep, but you wouldn't have looked at him and said the same thing. I know you don't look at me romantically, but I guess it just seems nicer if it's someone of the opposite sex," Hermione speculated.

"I guess it's the same kind of thing as hugging. I'm happy to hug you and Ginny, but it would be weird to hug Ron."

"You will, eventually. Men do hug each other, you probably just have to be older. But anyway, you weren't always comfortable with hugging. I think the first couple of times I did it, you didn't know what to do."

"That's probably because you were the first person who ever hugged me," Harry pointed out. "It was just... unfamiliar."

Hermione looked at him with obvious pity. "I'm sorry, Harry, sometimes I forget stuff like that. You really came out amazingly well considering what you went through. And now look at you. You hugged Cho without any discomfort, you said 'I love you' to Ginny and I. You've come a long way."

"And ironically, I have Voldemort to thank, at least for the second one. I'm a little embarrassed to admit this, but I'll tell you anyway. When Professor Dumbledore suggested that I use feelings of love to drive Voldemort out of my mind, I actually had to ask him how I knew whether I loved something, or just liked it a lot. I felt like an idiot, but I had to ask anyway. Now, I can summon up feelings of love quickly, and I'm sure I understand what it is. I have you, Ron, and Ginny to thank for that. But I never would be able to do it now if I hadn't needed it as a weapon against Voldemort. I feel like I'm, I don't know, a bit happier in general since I've been doing that."

She smiled. "You should keep doing that, even after Voldemort is gone. I'm really happy for you, Harry. It's like you had something really nice, and suddenly you can appreciate it better than before. Interesting... I wonder if that's part of what drew Fawkes to you?"

"Could be... Professor Dumbledore said phoenixes can see through people, so if I was getting more comfortable with the idea of love, Fawkes would have known. But that's interesting... in the last few days, a few similar things happened: Hagrid said he thought that Fawkes picked me because I had some of the same qualities as Dumbledore. Snape said this morning that only Dumbledore could have done as well as I did against Voldemort. Do you think that maybe one reason that Dumbledore's the way he is because he 'comes from a place of love,' as he puts it? And if I'm managing that more, people think I'm similar to him?"

"It makes sense, Harry. Judging by how he acts, I wouldn't be at all surprised if he always 'comes from a place of love.' And judging by how you acted in the dream, I wouldn't be surprised if you could do it any time you tried. Dumbledore manages to do it even in crisis situations. If you did it for long enough, who's to say you wouldn't be able to do what he does? I think you'd find it's a good way to be, even if you're not fighting Voldemort."

"Yeah, that makes sense... hey, we should stop talking, you need your sleep."

"It's okay, Harry. We don't always get a chance to talk like this. It's like staying up late at a sleepover, it's nice. Listen," she said, looking at him seriously. "I know you're not going to want to hear this, but I really want to tell you anyway. Ginny and Cho are right, but there's another aspect to this. I'm sure that being in love is wonderful, even better than the love we have for each other as friends, and that's pretty good in itself. It's supposed to be the best thing about being human. What I'm saying is that if you want to defy Voldemort, you can't deny yourself, and this other person, such a basic and wonderful thing. You can't let him intimidate you into foregoing that. You're not really defying him if you don't live your life as you would have lived it if he wasn't around."

"I'm not denying that the danger exists, even that it's high. But Ginny's right, whoever falls in love with you will know it, and accept it. She may end up a grief-stricken widow, but she knowingly took the risk. It's not fair for you to deny people the right to put themselves at risk for you, and for themselves, if they want to. If you reject someone who falls in love with you because you don't love her, fine. But if you reject her, even though you love her, because you're concerned for her safety, it won't do her heart any good. She'll feel as rejected as she would be if you didn't love her. You'll hurt her worse by rejecting her than you would by loving her and exposing her to risk. And if either of you died, it would be horrible for the other one. But we can't go through life afraid. You've said that yourself."

He gave her a pained look; she extended her hand out to him, and he took it. He pondered for a few minutes, the only sound in the room being Fawkes' song. Finally, he said, "I guess this is like the thing yesterday. Part of me accepts your argument, understands it makes sense. But I don't know if I could actually do it. What bothers me most about what you said is the bit about how she'd feel if I rejected her for that reason. I hadn't thought of that. I just thought she'd understand my reasons."

Hermione smiled sadly, and shook her head. "She'd understand them in her head, but not in her heart. Right now, I think you can understand the difference." When Harry didn't reply, she continued. "I'm not saying that you should find the likeliest girl and ask her out for Hogsmeade weekend. It even makes sense to me that you're not going out looking for a girlfriend. I'm talking about what happens if you wake up one day and find that you're in love. It could happen. Letting yourself love someone could be your greatest act of bravery."

How can it be an act of bravery to expose someone else to danger, was the first thought to go through Harry's mind. He realized that she must be referring to how badly he'd be hurt if something happened to whoever he loved, and that he'd have to be brave to risk that. He didn't feel quite that brave. Fortunately, it wasn't something he had to worry about just then.

"Well, I can't deny what you say. All I can say is that I'm sure I'll remember it, if the situation ever does actually happen. And... thanks. I know you're trying to help." She gave his hand a squeeze, and they let go.

"I'm just trying to make sure you have a life, that you don't deny yourself something that important... well, I guess I should go to sleep now. I love talking to you, but I'm really tired. Fawkes has got me all relaxed." She moved around, getting comfortable, then looked up at him and smiled. "It's okay, I don't mind if you watch."

He smiled in return. "I will, thanks." He reached over and picked up a quill and a piece of parchment. He pondered what to say for a while as Hermione fell asleep. Fawkes continued to sing. Finally, Harry started writing.

Dear Remus,

First, I hope you don't mind me using your first name. I think of you as more of a friend than a former teacher, so it just seems natural to use it.

I'm sure you've read the Sunday Prophet by now, so I don't have to take up several inches telling you about it. The article seems accurate and fair, so I'm not sure what I could tell you that would explain the situation better.

Everyone keeps telling me how brave I am. But I sometimes wonder whether 'stubborn' would be a better word. I wouldn't even give serious thought to stopping using Voldemort's name. And besides, if I did, he could get me to do anything he wanted just by threatening to do this again, and having given in once, I'd probably do it again. I just never saw myself as having any choice.

As far as the battle itself, it seems to be getting a bit better. In this morning's dream, the Curse's intensity was down slightly. Still really, really painful, obviously, but the fact that it's down at all means that I'm getting somewhere. Last night I focused on love in the dream; Voldemort didn't seem to like that, so I'm doing it again tonight. I've been getting much better at doing that, thanks to Professor Dumbledore. It's very strange, until August I had barely ever thought about love, and all of a sudden, my being able to stop these attacks totally depends on how well I can bring up feelings of love, and concentrate on them completely. Fortunately, Professor Dumbledore started talking to me about this the day you did that thing with the Dursleys' lawn (I loved it, you have to teach me how you did that sometime), so it wasn't a totally new idea. This is like a combination of Occlumency, where you have to focus on one thing, and repelling Voldemort, where that one thing is love. It seems like I'm a quick study when I'm threatened with something awful.

I really miss Sirius, especially at a time like this. I mean, everyone here has been great, and Professor Dumbledore has treated me wonderfully, giving me the maximum support and attention he can, it feels like. I'm not neglected, that's for sure. But I still wish I could talk to Sirius. I know he'd be proud of me. He would have wanted to be doing something like I am, to be at the center of the action. You must miss him a lot, too, I'm sure. It just occurred to me, I've been so wrapped up in my own sadness that I forgot how hard it must have been for you. You got your close friend back, after twelve years, and then lost him again. I should have thought of that.

Being a professor is really strange, but I'm starting to like it. You probably read in the article how much everyone's liked my classes. I admit that I'm surprised; I didn't think I was doing anything special. I wonder how much of it is that I'm Harry Potter. Hermione says she thinks it's partly how I teach, but partly what I represent-the idea of fighting Voldemort, and not being afraid of him-and that they're inspired by the idea of saying Voldemort's name, giving them a chance to do something brave and be proud of themselves. I don't know, but I'm really glad they like the classes. I remember when you were here, how much we all looked forward to your classes. It makes me happy to think that they might feel the same way. You were really good. Whenever I think about that, I get angry at Snape, for telling everyone about you so you'd have to go. It reminds me that now, Snape's actually being polite to me, with no trace of his usual attitude. Not friendly, of course, I don't know if he's even capable of that, but not nasty. He even praised my actions in this morning's dream, saying only Dumbledore could have done as well. It's pretty confusing to have him acting like this. I don't mind, obviously, I just wish I knew why.

I'm watching Hermione sleep as I write this, with Fawkes singing. I'm still amazed that Fawkes chose me. It's hard to think of a better thing to have happened to me. He's already saved my life once, and I have a feeling he'll do it again before this is all over. But not only that, just the comfort of his presence, and the honor of having been chosen, are great. It's really overwhelming.

It's only been a short time since the article came out, so I haven't gotten that much reaction, but already Hermione, Ginny, and Cho have told me that I'm wrong to be scared of what might happen to any future girlfriend I might have, that I just have to accept the risk. Maybe they're right. It's just that getting others to share my risks has never been something I've been good at. I suppose I won't really know what I'll do until I'm faced with it.

Harry looked up and watched Hermione for a few minutes, lost in thought. Then he continued:

I guess that's all I can think of for now; I hope everything is okay with you. Harry.

P.S. I was thinking, next summer, on the day before my seventeenth birthday, how about you and I go to an amusement park. I'd like to do that. Let me know.

Harry read the letter again, then folded it up to give to Hedwig later. He picked up the Prophet carefully, being sure not to make enough noise to wake Hermione, and finished reading the article. He thought that it was perhaps a little

too generous to him, but then he thought that he deserved it, after what the Prophet had done to him last year, and Rita Skeeter the year before that. He got up and got his Defense Against the Dark Arts teaching book to help decide what to do for the coming week's lessons, and to read in general for more ideas. He got so lost in it that he didn't even notice Fawkes stop singing, and before he knew it, it was noon.

Harry decided to get out the Marauder's Map to find out where Ron and Ginny were. After a few seconds' search, he found them near the Quidditch pitch, probably just having had a fly and heading in for lunch. They were with Dennis Creevey and Katie Bell, so Harry assumed that Katie had been giving Ginny and Dennis pointers on their new position. He was about to put the map away when something caught his eye; there was someone in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. He looked closer and saw a dot with the name 'Pansy Parkinson.' He exhaled in mild frustration; what was she doing looking for him? He suddenly realized that it could be important. He stood quickly, put the Map into his robes, and grabbed his bag and put his Invisibility Cloak into it. Still being sure not to make undue noise, he left the dormitory and headed towards the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.

He arrived in a few minutes to see Pansy looking at the walls of the room, and was briefly reminded of Ron's 'Hall of Misfortune' joke. He walked up to her; she heard him and turned around. "Harry, thanks for coming. I was about to give up and go to lunch."

"What made you think I would come?" asked Harry, puzzled. "I don't know how you would think I knew you were here."

"The same way Hermione knew Nott was heading toward the pitch yesterday. He was under an Invisibility Cloak, she had no way to know he was there. You guys must have something that tells you where people are." She smiled a bit in satisfaction at having worked it out.

Harry grunted in displeasure. "I hope you're the smartest of the older Slytherins, I'd rather nobody else figured that out. Come on," he said, gesturing her to the office. They entered the office and closed the door.

Since she already knew enough, Harry decided there couldn't be much more danger in telling her the rest. He pulled out the Map and laid it out in front of her. She took only a few seconds to recognize what it did. "Wow, this is great," she marveled. "This gives you a big advantage."

He nodded. "Not to mention, helped Hermione save my life yesterday. I'm going to have to keep my eye on it while we talk. And if somebody gets close, I want you to put this on, quick." He pulled out his Invisibility Cloak, and threw it over himself to demonstrate.

She was very impressed. "Is this the one they got from Nott?"

He shook his head. "It's mine, from my father. I've had it since first year."

She looked amused. "Draco always thought you had one of these, but he could never prove it. That time you threw mud at him in Hogsmeade."

"It was a stupid thing to do. I could've gotten caught, I was lucky not to have."

"Maybe, but I can understand why you did. The temptation must have been irresistible." She looked up. "I came here because I realized something that could be helpful to all of us who are helping you. Everybody knows how much the Slytherin first years like you, and you them. I'd be amazed if it wasn't the case that they're going to keep their eyes open for you, let you know if anything happens in Slytherin. I think most of the older Slytherins just assume that's the case anyway; at this point, the first years' support for you is so open that they don't have to fear reprisals. Draco's not going to bother, he knows it's a lost cause. I want you to tell them about me."

Harry was startled. "No way," he said automatically. "It's too risky. There's ten of them. I mean, I trust them, but they're first years. They might say the wrong thing, say something too loud, be overheard. We can't do that."

She smiled at him, more with her eyes than her mouth. "It's so sweet the way you worry, Harry. No one's ever worried about me except my parents, and then, not even that much. But, first of all, being found out isn't exactly a death sentence. No one's going to kill me without a reasonable chance of escaping, and that would be hard. Draco would just stop talking to me, and that would be that. Secondly, if they know about me, it could be very helpful. They could tell me things, small details that might be significant, but that you or even they might not recognize as significant. I know Slytherin really well, so I'd be able to recognize things for what they are. I can meet them easily to get information, I can go into their dormitories on my prefect duties. It's perfect."

Harry shook his head. "I understand that, but it's still too dangerous."

Now she looked at him evenly, seriously. "I hate to do this, Harry, but I'm going to tell them anyway. You know it's a good idea too. You're only trying to stop me because of the risk. Well, it's a risk I choose to take. I can tell them in Slytherin alone, but I thought it was better if I told them with you. They might not believe me if I tell them myself, but if you tell them, they will. Or is this one of those things that you're not willing to trust me with?"

He glared at her, then looked down, embarrassed. "No, I trust you. I wouldn't have believed I could, this fast, but I do. No, it's the risk. I just hate the idea..." He took a few steps around the office, frustrated. "I guess I'm going to have to get used to the idea of people taking risks for me that I'd rather they didn't."

She smiled. "You mean, like being your girlfriend?"

With an embarrassed grin, he shook his head. "I didn't even know I was thinking that. Hugo just plucked it out of my head, and I couldn't deny it when he said it. I've already heard from Ginny, Cho, and Hermione that I'm wrong, and being unrealistic. Maybe they're right. It's just really hard."

"Well, let me add my voice to theirs. I think most girls would agree. I couldn't sign it, of course, but I wanted to."

"Sign what?" he asked, but was distracted by her startled twitch. She pointed at the Map, which showed Malfoy approaching. He grabbed the cloak and handed it to her. "Sit down in the corner, and don't make a sound. Don't even breathe too loud."

She sat and pulled the cloak over her. Harry took a look to make sure no part of her was not covered, put the Map away, then pulled his teaching text out of his bag and opened it so that it looked like he was preparing. He also made sure that his wand was within quick reach, in case Malfoy decided to try to take advantage of the fact that they were alone. Malfoy walked straight in, clearly not expecting to find anyone there; Harry assumed he planned to walk through the teacher's office to the classroom, maybe as a shortcut on his way somewhere else. Malfoy recoiled in surprise as he saw Harry. "What are you doing here?" he snarled.

Harry puzzled for a moment to make sure he'd heard the question correctly, then said, "I'm the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Malfoy, and this is the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher's office. I can try to explain further if you'd like."

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "I mean, it's noon on a Sunday. It doesn't seem likely that you'd be here."

Harry attempted to look irritated at having to explain himself. "Well, after a spot of torture, it's nice to relax in solitude with a good book. Now, why are you here?"

Malfoy looked at Harry as if he were obviously crazy, then smiled. "You really are deranged, Potter. You'll let yourself get tortured so you can have people pay attention to you? Tell you how great you are? You've always wanted publicity so much, now look how low you'll sink, how you'll degrade yourself, to get what you want."

Stay calm, Harry told himself. Think about love. Don't let Malfoy provoke you.

He looked at Malfoy sadly. "I said this after the first morning, Malfoy. You don't understand, but neither does Voldemort, so you're in good company. I'm really not going to explain myself to you."

"And you get these girls to feel sorry for you, like you're some kind of hero," Malfoy continued, as if Harry hadn't spoken. "It's pathetic."

"I don't see a lot of girls chasing after you, Malfoy. You shouldn't talk. Who's going to want to marry a future Death Eater?"

Malfoy looked smug. "I'll have no problems, Potter, and I'll do it without suffering and groveling. Pansy has the inside track, I might take her if she's lucky."

Harry almost looked at the corner to see if Pansy would move. "What an honor for her, Malfoy. I'll be sure to mention it to her the next time I see her."

Malfoy chuckled. "Yeah, like she'll believe you. She knows what's good for her, and that's me. Women are drawn to power, Potter, not stupid heroics."

Harry had heard enough, as, he suspected, had Pansy. "Whatever you say, Malfoy. Would you like to debate the meaning of life, or would you like to tell me what you're doing here?"

"I was looking for Pansy, Potter. Don't suppose you've seen her anywhere?"

"If this is an unlikely place for me at noon on Sunday, Malfoy, then it seems really unlikely for her. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Malfoy stared at Harry, hatred in his eyes. "Do you know what will happen one day, Potter?"

Harry looked at Malfoy evenly. "Yes, Malfoy. We'll look back on this and laugh. Professor Trelawney told me. Now, I'd like to get on with my book and solitude, but I'll tell you what... in tomorrow morning's dream, I'll put in a good word for you with Voldemort. Let him know how well you've been supporting him here. Don't say I never did anything for you. Goodbye, now."

Malfoy was still looking daggers at Harry, but then his look changed to a scornful one, as if he realized he was engaged in a stupendous waste of time. "Pathetic, Potter. Truly pathetic," he said, and walked away.

Harry closed the door and locked it, then put his hand up, palm out, toward the corner to indicate that Pansy should not get up yet. He took out the Map and looked at it as Malfoy's dot moved away. He changed the gesture to indicate that she could get up.

Pansy took the Cloak off as she stood up, and handed it to Harry. She was looking at the door, a furious expression on her face. Harry thought of making a joke, but then thought better of it. "I'm sorry, Pansy. I would say that you showed great restraint in not throwing the Cloak off and strangling him."

"I seriously considered it. I was wondering if spells would penetrate an Invisibility Cloak," she fumed. "I feel like such an incredible fool. Not that I care what he thinks of me now, but all that time, that was his attitude and I didn't know..."

Her expression changed from angry to pained. "But I deserve it, don't I... I was no better, being a sycophant. Why should he respect me, when he could get my allegiance so easily."

"He could have never respected you anyway, Pansy, no matter what you'd done. If you hadn't been a sycophant, he wouldn't have had anything to do with you. He doesn't want friends he can respect, he wants allies he can dominate. But you've changed that, it doesn't matter anymore."

She looked at him with pain and urgency. "No, it doesn't, but what he said was a reminder of how I've been stupid, how I've wasted years of my life. And the worst of it is, he was right about one thing. Women are attracted to power. I was. There were times when I imagined myself Mrs. Draco Malfoy, with a powerful husband and a big house and lots of nice things. That seemed like what was important. But what does a thirteen-year-old know?"

Harry was quiet. "I'm sorry, Pansy. I'm not sure I know what to say."

She shook her head, near tears. "You don't have to say anything, it's nice of you just to listen." She paused. "I feel like I'm in mourning... mourning for a part of my life that was spent badly, that was wasted. For a person that I should never have been, but somehow was. I know I've started a new part of my life, but I guess I have to get the old one out of my system first."

Tears were trickling down her cheeks. She looked at him, and suddenly took a step toward him and leaned into him, her head on his shoulder, hugging him lightly. He was startled, but made himself not back off, as it would have been cruel. She sobbed into his shoulder. His heart melted; he knew she had hurt people and made bad choices, but at least she had realized her mistakes. He put his arms around her and hugged her back, moving his hands across her back a little, as Ginny and Hermione had with him. He still didn't know what to say, so he stayed silent, letting her cry herself out.

She hung on for a little after she had stopped crying, then backed away to dry her tears and blow her nose. She looked at him every few seconds, as if wanting to know how he was seeing her, what he thought. Then she smiled again and said, "Harry, I bet Hugo had no trouble reading you like a book. Your eyes are very expressive. You're very concerned, and you feel bad that there's not much you can do for me. Also, you were a little uncomfortable about being cried on, but you hung in there anyway. Like the brave person you are."

He couldn't help but smile. "I'm glad you're comfortable enough to tease me. I wasn't that uncomfortable, just surprised. And I do wish there was something I could do for you, but I don't think there is."

"Actually, there is. When I decided I wanted to join up with the first years, I wanted to meet you as soon as possible. I came here a couple of times during the

morning, hoping you'd find out I was here. This was my third try. And I was getting frustrated that I couldn't contact you, and I realized I was really looking forward to seeing you. Now, if your friends were here, they'd be teasing you, saying I was obviously keen on you. But here's why I think I felt that way.

"I'm attracted... not exactly to you as such, but to qualities you have, to what you represent-a better, nobler, nicer way to be. To the idea of doing something because it's right, and for others, not out of self-interest. You're like a symbol of that, and it's easy to want to be around that. You've also been kind and sympathetic, not to mention forgiving. But also, you're the only one I can talk to about this, the only one who, when I'm around, I can try to be the person I want to be. If I was open in my support for you, I could be who I wanted, talk to anyone. But because I've decided to do it this way-and no, don't try to talk me out of it again-when I'm not with you, I have to go back and pretend that I'm still what I was. Even in the short time since I've made this change, I understand that it's depressing to be around that, what I was. I know, I made the choice. I want to help so badly that I'm content with my choice. But the way you can help me is by being here for me. If you could spend some time with me, maybe an hour a week, even if there's no real need, it would really help. I guess I just need emotional support. I hate to ask it of you, I know you're pretty busy, being a teacher and a student... but..." She trailed off.

Even before he thought about it, Harry knew that he couldn't say no. Even if he didn't want to, he was responsible for her, he owed it to her. But he was surprised to find that he didn't mind doing it at all.

"Pansy... this is funny, if someone had told me two days ago this would happen, I'd have said they were crazy... but I realize I've already come to think of you as a friend. And I'm happy to spend some time every week talking to a friend. It's no problem."

She gave him that look again, the one from yesterday that the others had said was very revealing. Then she hugged him again, this time for only a few seconds before letting go. "That's so kind of you to say, Harry, I really don't deserve it. But I appreciate it anyway." She chuckled ruefully. "This is really something Malfoy would think is stupid and pathetic. All you have to do is be kind to me, and I'm really happy. He'd say you're weak if you have to depend on someone else."

Harry shook his head. "He'll make a good Death Eater, he already thinks like them. We all rely on each other, that's one of our strengths. We get energy, strength, and support from each other. I should know, I've been getting nothing but that for two days now, and it's made me stronger. Including from you. Think about how it makes me feel-you started a new way of thinking, that'll help you have a happier life, partly because of me, something I did-"

"Mostly because of you," she corrected.

"Anyway, it makes me feel really good, is the point. So it helps me, too. You see what I mean. I mean, this morning Hermione hugged me out of the Curse. Justin, Ernie and Cho came by to be supportive. We went back to the dormitory and Hermione tried to tell me I shouldn't be scared to have a girlfriend. Fawkes sang. I met you, who wants to do what you can to support me. All morning, nothing but support. Even when I wrote to Remus, I knew he'd be supporting me, even though he's not here."

"Remus?"

"Remus Lupin, remember, he taught this, third year."

"Oh, yes, the werewolf. I saw you mentioned him in the article. I didn't know you were that close to him."

"He was a close friend of my father's, and I've seen him from time to time. He's a really nice man, doesn't deserve the treatment he gets, being a werewolf."

"What did you write to him about? He must know everything from the Prophet anyway."

"I was going to the owlery to send it when I saw that you were here. If you'd like, you should go ahead and read it. It'll give you an idea of how I'm feeling." Harry almost surprised himself by offering, but he wanted to make a gesture. She had put a great deal of trust in him.

She eyed him, obviously also surprised, then took the letter he was offering, opened it, and read it. One time she glanced up at him, but mostly she read. After she finished, she handed it back to him. "An amusement park?"

"A reference to a joke I made a few months ago."

"And Sirius is... not Sirius Black?" Harry nodded. "But he was supposed to be trying to kill you in third year!" Harry quickly explained what had happened, and then how he lost Sirius in the Department of Mysteries. "So he spent twelve years in Azkaban for something he didn't do, and then we lost him fighting Death Eaters. It was really hard. He was my godfather, and even when he was on the run, was always trying to look out for me. I just wish..." he trailed off, realizing that he was starting to feel like he might cry.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said, and it was very obvious that she meant it. "I guess he was kind of like a parent to you."

Harry nodded. "Kind of. I lost my own parents, of course, and the Muggles who raised me never liked me, hated the fact that I was a wizard. So I never had any adults who really looked after me and cared about me, until the Weasleys, and then Sirius."

"I didn't know that, about your Muggle family. If Malfoy knew, that would be another whole line of insults you'd get," she said disgustedly. Harry got the feeling that the disgust was aimed equally at herself, who would have been making the jokes along with Malfoy until a short time ago. "It's funny... I grew up in a traditional wizarding home, not rich but well-off... but my parents... I don't know, I guess they love me, but they've always treated me kind of formally. When I was a kid, I saw some of my friends interacting with their families, and some of them got hugged and kissed by their parents. Mine hardly did any of that. At the time, I never really thought about it. But when I hear you talk about Sirius, I feel like, that's what a parent should be like. I feel really bad for you that you lost him, but part of me envies the time that you did have with him, even if it was short. You knew what it felt like to be really cared about.

"You've had an interesting life, Harry. It's like somebody turned the intensity full on. The bad things you've had-parents and Sirius dying, Muggle relatives, being a target of the Dark Lord-have been really bad, and the good things-your friends, the support of the community, Fawkes-have been really good. I bet not many people meet you and don't have some reaction."

Harry nodded, then mimed the most common reaction people had to seeing him: a look, a double-take, eyes moving up to look at the scar, then back to the face. Pansy giggled. "It's a whole sequence, isn't it?"

She became more serious again. "Harry... you showed me that letter, you've told me lots of personal things about yourself. I'm grateful, it makes me feel good... but I'd really like to know why. I mean, there's no way you do this with everyone."

It was a fair question, Harry thought. "I'm not sure... I think when I've done it, it's been an impulsive decision, like I just thought it was the right thing to do. Maybe it's partly because... I know it must've been really hard for you to come to me. I might have laughed and told you to get lost, and you probably wouldn't have blamed me." She nodded, her expression indicating that had been a concern. "And then you apologized, which couldn't have been easy either. You trusted me a lot. Maybe I'm just responding to that, I guess... I wanted to show you that I could trust you, too. But now, if I tell you something personal, it's because you're my friend. I showed you the letter because it sums up everything I'm thinking right now. The only thing that's going on that I didn't mention is you. Owls can be intercepted, and it's not something that he needs to know. But I wanted to tell him. Anyway, I hadn't really thought about my reasons for telling you stuff like this. I think what I said is pretty much it."

"That makes sense. I really want to thank you, you didn't have to do it... I'm sorry, this is really none of my business, but... can I ask you another really personal

question?" Harry smiled and gestured for her to continue. "What happened with you and Cho last year, and why did she come talk to you today? I was surprised when she hugged you. I thought you weren't an item anymore."

Harry told her what had happened. She listened attentively, and gasped and put her hand over her mouth when he told her about the jinx that had afflicted Marietta Edgecombe. "Wow... remind me never to cross Hermione."

Harry finished up the story. "So, we really couldn't get past that. Marietta was her friend, and Cho felt like she had to stand up for her. I can understand that, but I couldn't forgive what she did, at least not so soon. All Cho lost was a nice diversion once a week. But the D.A. had been the highlight of my week, and Marietta cost me that, plus Professor Dumbledore had to leave, to protect me. What she did cost me a lot, and Cho didn't, maybe couldn't, really appreciate that. Anyway, I guess our tempers cooled over the summer, and Marietta apologized to Dumbledore and I at the introductory feast. I was a little slow to forgive her, Professor Dumbledore had to prod me. So today, Cho came over to be supportive of what I'm doing, and to make sure we were okay to be friends. I hope we can be, but the funny thing is, I haven't actually talked with her all that much, I was too nervous when I was around her. I've already talked with you more, and about more personal things, than I did with her. In a way, I really don't know her that well. But I think she's a nice person. It just didn't work out."

"Thank you for telling me that, too. I was curious how that turned out. I remember..." She looked down, upset. "I remember making fun of you and her on Valentine's Day, last year. I wonder how long it's going to take me to stop being mad at myself for what I've done."

Harry again said nothing, not knowing what to say. Finally, he said, "Maybe you should try to think more about what you're doing now, how that makes you feel. You can't change the past."

Harry felt from her expression that while she appreciated that he was trying to help, she was thinking that he couldn't really understand how she felt. "I think that's easier said than done. I know you're right, but it's hard. I'll see how it goes." She reached over and started to pet Fawkes again. "I hate to say it, but I guess we'd better leave soon. We still need to eat lunch, and I have to think of what to tell Malfoy about where I've been. So, how are we going to do this thing with the first years?"

"I've asked Hermione to come up with a method of communication, something where we can signal each other. I'll ask her to make sure that it also allows you and the first years to signal each other, in addition to me. I'd like to wait to tell them

about you until whatever she comes up with is ready. Then I'll let you know, and we can arrange a meeting with all twelve of us."

"Okay, that sounds good. Much as I might be tempted, until that's ready, I won't contact you unless it's necessary." She looked at the Map carefully. "I want to find out where Malfoy is, so I can avoid him for a while. I wish this thing could tell you where someone had been, so I'd know where he's looked for me. Oh, good, he's in the common room, I can go have lunch without being bothered."

"One other thing, Harry... this is going to sound strange, me telling you to be careful, but I should. Like I said before, your eyes are very expressive. You have to watch out for that. I see how you look at me now, and I'm really happy about it. But you can't look at me like that out there, you have to look like you don't care if I exist or not, and I have to do the same with you. If you look at me like you are now, even Malfoy will figure out that something's wrong."

He nodded his understanding. "Good point, I might not have thought of that."

She looked at the Map again, then at Harry. He saw that revealing look again. "Thank you, Harry, for everything." She turned and left. He waited a minute, gathered his things in his bag, and headed to the owlery, then on to lunch.

The rest of the day went by pleasantly for Harry. Quidditch practice was enjoyable; Ginny was already a good Chaser, and Dennis definitely had potential. It felt good to be on his broom again. Then he met Hermione, told her about the meeting with Pansy, and what he hoped for in a communications setup. He told the others more details about his conversation with Pansy, to make sure they knew that he now trusted her, and why. The rest of the day was taken up by schoolwork, dinner, and Dumbledore's Occlumency lesson. Harry felt he was doing very well with Occlumency and focusing on love, and was full of confidence that the night's encounter with Voldemort would go well. He fell asleep faster than usual; he didn't know whether it was because of his confidence, or just being tired.

Harry was walking through a park. He was looking for someone, but he wasn't sure who. He continued walking, but the scene changed. He was now in the room in the Department of Mysteries which contained the Veil of Mystery.

Harry looked around for a moment, then realized that Voldemort would be appearing any time now. Focus on love, he thought. He mentally slipped into the sea of love, more easily than before. Nothing else matters.

"You recognize this room, don't you, Potter? The room where your godfather died? If one of them was to die, I'm glad it was him." Voldemort was smiling his cruel smile, looking very satisfied.

Harry felt a flash of anger, accompanied by an equally fast realization: he's trying to goad you, make you lose your control. His words don't matter. Keep focused,

"I don't think so, Voldemort. I think you're just trying to goad me into anger, because your grip on this is slipping, and you know it is. If you could have chosen the one to die, it would have been Professor Dumbledore. He's the biggest threat to you. You fear him because he's powerful, and he understands you."

Voldemort again looked furious; Harry reflected that he hadn't even been trying to goad Voldemort, but had apparently succeeded just by telling the truth. "I fear no one!" Voldemort practically screamed.

"You fear him, but you can't admit it, probably not even to yourself. You fear him because you don't understand his strength. His strength is love, which you're not capable of understanding. It's natural to fear what we don't understand." Focus on love, he thought.

"If I do not understand something, then it is not worth understanding. I know all I need to know. You will be broken. Soon, you will never be able to sleep again."

Harry actually chuckled out loud. "If you had said that three days ago, I might have believed you. But now, it just sounds like a feeble threat. You're losing this fight, Voldemort." Relax, relax in a sea of love, he thought.

"Speaking of fights lost... you recall this, don't you, Potter?" said Voldemort with obvious relish. Harry saw Sirius being hit by Bellatrix's spell, staggering back, and falling through the veil. Then himself, agonized and distraught, screaming Sirius's name over and over again. The memories washed over him, threatening his control. Focus on love, he thought, fighting back the emotions that threatened him. He imagined Sirius standing behind him, hand on Harry's shoulder, giving him his love and strength, wanting him to stand firm and not have his death be used to Harry's harm. I have to do it for him, thought Harry. I have to stay calm. He felt the emotion fade.

"I loved him a lot, and he loved me. I miss him. But his strength is still with me. I can see him, cheering me on, wherever he is. He's proud of me, I know that." I might as well be speaking French, for all Voldemort understands of this, Harry thought. But it doesn't matter. I'm coming from a place of love, that's what matters.

"Really... would he be proud of this, Potter?"

The scene changed suddenly. They were now in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic; Harry saw himself crouching behind a statue, and heard Bellatrix yelling, "Come out, come out, little Harry!" He watched the sequence of events that occurred until Harry tried the Cruciatus Curse on Bellatrix. He saw the look on his own face, and barely recognized it as his. Still feeling love, he felt intense sympathy for this slightly younger self, at one of the worst moments of his life.

"I must say, Potter, I was impressed. Bella only told me of this today. You have more steel than I thought. Let me help you with this. Try the spell out on me. You must want to. What you did is a good start."

Stay calm, Harry told himself. It was crystal clear to him what Voldemort was doing, and Harry almost felt saddened, it was so pathetic. "I did what I did because I was wounded, Voldemort. The part of us humans which is like you came out for a few minutes. But I'm better now, and I've learned. I'll never even be tempted to do that again, and if I needed proof that it was dangerous, your suggesting that I do it would be that proof."

"But I deserve it, don't I? You said I was evil, after all..." He smiled.

"Whether you deserve it or not is not the question," Harry said, still calm. "I don't deserve it, and doing it to you is like doing it to myself. I respect myself too much to do that."

Voldemort shook his head. "Still addled, Potter. If you did it to me, you would not feel what you are about to feel."

Harry knew what was coming, and had a sudden inspiration. He took out his wand, and imagined an invisible shield surrounding him, a shield of light. He imagined that it was composed of love. He focused on that love. He imagined it protecting him.

"Crucio!" screamed Voldemort. Harry screamed and writhed in pain, but immediately, he knew it was very different. The pain was still consuming and intolerable, but well below what it usually was. Neville had said the pain was enough for twenty people; this felt like it was enough for eight. At the same time, he kept screaming, and then felt himself being held. As he wrapped his arms around... whoever, the real world once again reappeared. He gasped for breath and held on tight. He saw red hair, and pulled back to look at Ginny's face. She looked desperately protective, frustrated at being able to do nothing more than what she was doing. Then, suddenly, she kissed him on the cheek, very quickly. She looked at him again, and Harry saw more raw emotion than he had ever seen before. He couldn't put words to it, at least not right away. After another second, she held him again, and he reveled in the comfort.

He looked up to see the faces of Ron, Hermione, and Neville. Where was Dumbledore? he wondered. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dumbledore, who was sitting in a chair near the top of the bed. He shifted his position, moving Ginny over a bit, so he could see Dumbledore's face while still holding Ginny. Instead of a concerned look on Dumbledore's face, he thought he saw the smallest smile. Harry remembered how the pain had felt, but he smiled. "You noticed it too, didn't you," he said. Dumbledore nodded. Harry grinned broadly and raised a fist in triumph.

Ron, who wore his usual look of worry after the Curse, gaped in astonishment. "Harry, what in the world..." He trailed off. "What happened?"

Harry felt ecstatic, exuberant. He pulled away from Ginny a bit and smiled brilliantly. Ginny smiled back, but was still confused. On an impulse, he kissed her on the cheek as she had him, and held her once more. Over her shoulder, to the others, he said, "There was much less pain this time, much less. This'll be over soon, I can feel it." Ron, Hermione, and Neville smiled too, though not too broadly; apparently, to them, Harry's pain had seemed just as bad.

After holding Ginny for another few minutes, Harry asked Dumbledore, "Did you bring the Pensieve?" Dumbledore nodded, then Summoned it to a spot near the bed. Harry let go of Ginny, took out his wand, and started moving memories over. Dumbledore had Fawkes retrieve Snape and McGonagall, who were soon in the room. Dumbledore said to them, "There was a substantial reduction in Harry's pain this time. We must watch carefully." Everyone stood around the Pensieve, then at Dumbledore's signal, put their fingers in.

There was a sudden gasp from all the students except Harry to find themselves in a different location, and one so familiar. Neville in particular looked very frightened, though, Harry thought, he had every right to be. Harry patted him on the shoulder; Neville looked at him, nodded, and calmed down.

As Voldemort tried to goad Harry, he saw the anger on his friends' faces, to be replaced by satisfaction as they saw him resist the provocation. Then there were more gasps as they saw Sirius die, and Harry scream in desperation. His friends looked at Harry with pity; they had known what had happened, but none except Neville had been in the room at the time.

The Harry watching saw Dumbledore looking proudly at the Harry dreaming as he resisted this provocation as well. Then the scene shifted to the Atrium. McGonagall gasped audibly as Harry attempted the Cruciatus Curse, and looked angry as Voldemort tried to goad Harry into using it again. After Harry resisted, just as Voldemort prepared to Curse him, Harry saw something he hadn't seen in the dream. He saw a shimmering, translucent energy field, roughly egg-shaped, surrounding him. He saw Voldemort issue the curse, and it made contact with the shield. Harry saw the shield vibrate, obviously affected by the curse, and he saw some of the curse get through. The dreaming Harry screamed, and the memory stopped. They were now back in the room with the Veil of Mystery.

Harry saw that everyone, with the exception of Snape, appeared emotionally affected by what they had seen, and even Snape looked astonished, though Harry didn't know why. McGonagall looked to Harry like she was trying to stifle her emotions.

"Harry, that was... unexpectedly, intensely personal. We could have made other arrangements for seeing this," said Dumbledore. "In any case... it is truly remarkable that you were able to remain calm in the face of such intense provocations. But I must ask you something else now. At the end, just before he Cursed you, what did you do?"

"I visualized a shield, made of the energy of love. I imagined it protecting me."

McGonagall, Snape, and even Dumbledore exchanged awed looks. Harry didn't understand what they found so amazing. Most of the students didn't, either, but Hermione looked to Harry as if she might.

"Did you plan, or prepare, to do this?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry shook his head. "It was just... an inspiration, I guess. The whole idea came to me in a flash, and I just did it, automatically."

Snape finally spoke. "'He shall have powers the Dark Lord knows not,'" he quoted, obviously still stunned.

"Indeed... we had no idea," said a still awestruck Dumbledore. Harry started to seriously wonder what was going on, but he knew it must be very big indeed to cause this reaction in Dumbledore. "Minerva, is this what we think it is?"

"I do not see what else it could be, Albus." She looked back at Harry as if she had never met him before.

"Um... I'm not quite sure what it is that you see there," Harry said. "What is it that you saw that's so amazing?"

Dumbledore turned to Harry. "We cannot be certain, Harry... but we think it is very possible that you have just invented a spell that will block the Cruciatus Curse."

Chapter 13

The Unnamed Spell

"But... that's impossible," said Harry, not knowing what else to say.

"Indeed, Harry, that is what has always been thought," agreed Dumbledore.

"But the evidence is clear."

"What evidence?"

Dumbledore caused the dream to switch to the point just before Voldemort Cursed Harry; they were in the Atrium again. "Watch carefully, everyone. Some of the Curse will get through to Harry, but a great deal of it is stopped by the shield." The scene moved at normal speed, and now that they were looking for it, everyone saw what Dumbledore was referring to. The shield lit up, obviously dissipating the energy.

"But this was a dream," Harry protested. "Wouldn't it work differently in real life?"

Hermione answered before the teachers could. "No, apparently spells work the same way in dreams as in real life. No one understands exactly why. But many spells have been discovered in dreams. When applied in real life, they always work the same way."

Harry raised his eyebrows; he hadn't known this. How does she remember all this stuff she reads? Harry couldn't help but wonder. "And it didn't work at full effectiveness because..."

"Harry, almost no spell works with 100% effectiveness the first time it is tried. I would estimate this spell's effectiveness at between... what, Severus, between fifty and seventy percent?"

"Closer to seventy," replied Snape.

"For any first attempt at a spell, that is excellent. For one like this, it is astonishing. If Voldemort returns tomorrow, Harry, I believe it is highly likely that if you keep the same level of focus, the spell will be 100% effective."

All the students except Hermione broke into wide grins. "We can't celebrate yet, though," she pointed out. "He still has to do it, he still has to keep that kind of focus."

"Didn't you see what Harry overcame there?" asked Ron. "How could Voldemort possibly make it harder for Harry than that?"

"I'm just saying, let's not celebrate yet. When Harry goes a night without a dream, wait, without waking up screaming, then I will absolutely celebrate."

"Miss Granger is right, this is not done," agreed McGonagall. "Let us be optimistic, but not overconfident."

"Don't worry, Hermione, Professor, the last thing I'm going to be when facing Voldemort is overconfident, no matter what kind of shield I've got. I was optimistic last night, and I didn't have any kind of shield; I just thought I was making progress. I never thought I'd ever come up with a new spell. How does that happen, anyway?"

"Sometimes research can uncover them, Harry, but usually they are accidents, or acts of pure creativity," explained Dumbledore. "If it is one, this would fall into the latter category."

"This is one, Professor," said McGonagall. "We all saw it. There simply is no other explanation. This will work in the real world. It must." She turned to Harry. "Do you know, Harry, what a staggering development this will be for wizardry? Such a spell has not been created in... we should ask Professor Binns, but at least a hundred years."

"If they can learn it, the spell will be of tremendous assistance to Aurors," added Dumbledore. "Especially at a time such as this. But one thing at a time. We will prepare for tomorrow as we have until now. Harry, simply do the same thing tomorrow as you did today; I would recommend you make no modifications of any sort. Also, I must ask the five of you not to mention this to anyone else. I do not want the school talking about this until we know with more certainty. Harry, to anyone who asks, you should note continued progress and express optimism, but not give details. You may wish to lead others to believe that this dream was much like the rest. I also do not wish this to get back to Voldemort. He may or may not have noticed what happened, but he may believe it to be an anomaly. I would prefer he was kept in the dark as much as possible. Is that clear to everyone?" Five heads nodded in answer. "Very well, let us return to the dormitory."

Snape left the dormitory via Fawkes. Dumbledore looked like he was about to leave, but McGonagall stayed behind, so he did too. McGonagall faced Harry.

"Harry... setting aside the discovery of an important new spell, I could not live with myself if I left here without commenting on your performance. That you are able to stay calm and focused while dealing with Voldemort is achievement enough. That you were able to do so as he took some of the most difficult moments of your life and used them to mock and attack you... I simply would not have believed it could have been done. Well, yes, the headmaster could have done it. But still, you are in excellent company. I am extremely proud of you."

Her face was showing far more emotion than he had ever seen her display, and it touched him. He took a deep breath. "Thank you, Professor," he said, then decided to throw caution to the winds; he stepped toward her and hugged her. She was taken aback, but after a second, she put her arms around him and hugged him back. After a few seconds, they separated. Harry wanted to say something else, but couldn't think of anything.

She sniffled and turned to the others, as Dumbledore smiled. Looking at Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville, she adopted the sternest expression she could muster under the circumstances, and said, "If anyone breathes a word of this-

"Professor..." Hermione interrupted. She beamed at McGonagall. "What you said to Harry was so sweet... of course we wouldn't do that to you." The others earnestly nodded in agreement. McGonagall nodded, rubbed her eyes, and stepped back. Dumbledore added, "Interestingly, Harry, I think it likely that the trial under which you were operating was in fact a contributing factor to what you discovered. It is during our most stressful moments that we can reach deep within ourselves and find qualities we did not know we possessed. I suppose that I will have to stop being surprised by anything you do. Good morning, everyone." They turned and left.

The five students sat in silence, stunned at what had happened. Finally they started talking, and they continued until well after the sun was up.

Harry was halfway through breakfast when the morning owls came into the Hall. Harry casually noted that there were more owls than usual. This was soon brought home to him by the fact that half of the owls headed in his direction. Letters, and a few packages, started falling in front of Harry like rain, completely covering his food. As the last of the owls flew away, and people saw the pile of mail in front of Harry, a laugh worked its way around the tables. Hermione raised her eyebrows in response to Harry's surprised look. "Well, you did expect this to happen, didn't you? You're Harry Potter, you're doing something brave that involves Voldemort, you're saying his name... you didn't expect a lot of people to want to say something?"

"Well, I never thought about it, really..." Harry trailed off.

"It's a good thing," said a grinning Ron, "that you use that keen intelligence of yours in your dreams, where it can do you some good, and not waste it here, in situations like this. Hermione can always explain things to you anyway." Harry tried to look annoyed in response, but couldn't quite manage it.

"I brought an extra bag for it," said Hermione as she pulled it out of her larger bookbag. "Do you want to put them all in the bag, or read some of them now?"

Harry shook his head in amazement. "Well, let's put them in the bag, but I want to check them to see if they have familiar names first. I'll have to look at most of them at lunchtime or after Potions." They all started picking up letters and looking at them.

"Oh, this is from Mrs. Weasley, Harry!" said Hermione excitedly.

Ron and Ginny exchanged a look. "This is going to be good," chuckled Ginny.

"Dear Harry," Hermione read aloud. "If you were here, I would hug you and kiss you until you got so embarrassed you'd have to run off and hide. What you said was so incredibly sweet, thank you so much. Arthur and I were so thrilled, and he got a few dozen calls from friends and co-workers who read the article. We've been so worried about you, and we still are, but we know Professor Dumbledore will be taking good care of you. I'm sure my son and daughter are doing their best as well. We love you, Harry. Thank you! Love, Molly and Arthur."

"I'm surprised it's not longer," Ron said. "I guess they're too busy with all the calls."

"Hey, what's this?" asked Harry, who had just picked up a scroll, a rather thick one. He looked at it oddly.

"Well, open it up and find out!" urged Hermione, who Harry felt looked suspiciously like she knew what it was.

He opened it up and unrolled it; it looked to be about five feet long. He started reading aloud from the top, and couldn't help noticing that Ginny and Hermione had huge grins on their faces. "We, the undersigned female students of Hogwarts, by affixing our signatures below, do solemnly swear the following: that, if we were Harry Potter's girlfriend, we would..." Harry trailed off, leaned forward, and put his head in his hands in embarrassment as scattered laughter could be heard throughout the Great Hall, mostly female-sounding.

Ron leaned over and picked it up, then gleefully started reading in a loud voice: "we would not care how much danger he was in, we would stand by him and help him. We believe that his wishes in this matter are noble, but misguided, and we urge him to avail himself of the benefits that close female companionship can offer. Signed..." Ron was starting to laugh so hard he was having trouble finishing the statement. Harry glanced at the sheet, and saw four feet of parchment's worth of names. He blinked; there had to be about a hundred names there, which was over two-thirds of the female students at Hogwarts. Hermione and Ginny were laughing, no doubt at his reaction. Harry heard a few girls shout "Speech! Speech!" followed by others seconding the idea. Hermione and Ginny motioned for him to stand; Ron was still laughing too hard to do much of anything. When it became clear that the Hall was not going to leave him alone, he finally stood. The noise died down.

"I... I don't know what to say, really. I'm very pleased... and really embarrassed, of course..." There was more laughter. Turning serious, he said, "In the dreams, I've told Voldemort about the support I've gotten here, and how much it's helped. Not surprisingly, he doesn't understand it at all. He has no idea what the support of a community feels like. But I do, and it's great. I couldn't be doing what I'm doing right now without the support you give me, and I know that this is another form of support. Everybody who signed it..." He felt tears start to well up, so he decided he'd better stop talking. "... thank you very much." A round of applause went up as he sat down. A smiling Hermione offered him a tissue, which he started to refuse, then took. "I can't believe so many people did that," he muttered. He was still fighting off the emotion; he was deeply touched by the gesture. Suddenly struck by a thought, he picked up the scroll and looked to see whose the first name was. It was Helen Clark, followed by the other Slytherin first year girls. He noticed that the next names were other first years, and glancing down, that it went roughly in ascending order of age.

He went back to sorting through the mail, mainly because he wanted to finish his breakfast, and it was still under all the mail. He had gotten through half of it

when he turned to see the five Slytherin first year girls standing behind him. He smiled and turned to face them. "So, this was your idea?"

They nodded proudly. "Some of the older girls helped us with the wording," said Helen, "but we wanted you to know we think you're wrong. It seems like a lot of other girls agree with us."

"Seems that way," Ron couldn't resist adding.

"Yes, I've heard that a lot lately," Harry said. "All I can say is, I'll worry about it when it happens. But thank you so much for doing this. It's great. I'm very happy."

"But you looked like you were going to cry earlier," a girl pointed out.

Ron snickered; Hermione gave him a dirty look. "Sometimes we cry when we're really happy," she explained.

"And we don't make fun of people for doing it," added Ginny pointedly.

"No, we don't," agreed Hermione.

"Well, maybe you don't, but-ow!" Ron exclaimed as Ginny, sitting next to him, delivered a strong backhand blow to Ron's upper arm. Hermione, across the table and unable to reach Ron, said, "Thank you, Ginny," as the Slytherins giggled.

"I'm always going to keep this," Harry said to the girls, "to remind me of how you supported me and cared about me."

"Just make sure it reminds you to have a girlfriend, too," said Helen seriously. "We really believe what that says. We think it's important."

Harry nodded. "I understand, and I appreciate that. It was..." Harry trailed off again. "Thank you."

"See you in class," one of them said, and they headed off. Harry looked up and saw Justin and Ernie standing on his other side, having already arrived while Harry was talking to the girls. They looked highly amused; Harry rolled his eyes. "Why couldn't you have come by before that scroll got here?"

"Well, it's more fun this way," explained Ernie with a straight face.

"And here I thought I was popular," Justin added. "Those were your Slytherin firsts, right?"

Harry nodded. "Apparently, it was their idea."

Justin smiled. "Couldn't help but notice you were having a bit of trouble keeping it together there. Not that I blame you, of course," he added, pretending to be scared, as Ginny turned toward him.

"Better say that," Ginny muttered.

"It's funny, it's like you can only handle so much emotion," said Harry, "and I've been getting so much help around here... but I can use every bit of it."

"What happened in the dream last night?" Ernie asked.

"The main difference was, he tried to goad me," Harry said, wanting not to lie and settling for leaving out many details. "He wanted me to lose my temper, because that would make it hard for me to fight him off. He taunted me about... some difficult times I've had. Believe me, you haven't been goaded until you've been goaded by Voldemort." Justin and Ernie looked like they believed it. "Just barely, I managed to stay in control, to not be goaded. In the end I got Cursed, of course, but it felt different. I'm making progress, and I'm optimistic."

"It was harder than you make it sound, Harry," said Ginny. "I wouldn't have believed what you did if I hadn't seen it. It was an incredible act of control."

"Wait a minute... you've seen it? How did you see it?" asked Ernie. Hermione explained about the Pensieve and how it worked. "So," she concluded, "Professor Dumbledore thought it would be helpful for him to see them personally, and Harry agreed. But he also asked us to come along, he wanted us to see them too."

Justin and Ernie stared, wide-eyed. "So... you've seen Voldemort?" asked Justin.

Hermione nodded. "You couldn't imagine a more evil person. Everything he says, his attitude... it's like he considers people bugs to be squashed if they annoy him. It gives you a chill just to look at him. Now imagine that... along with this evil thing reminding you of the hardest moments of your life, when you've suffered losses, or done something you wish you hadn't, showing them to you in images so you can see how you looked, then taunting you about them... and knowing you're going to be Cursed in a short time. That was Harry's situation. Most people would be on the ground, crying. I know I would. But he just stood there, calm as anything, and managed to project a sadness for Voldemort's lack of humanity. He never lost his control. Imagine that."

Ernie and Justin were silent for a short time. Finally Ernie said, "I don't think I can, really. It's all a bit too much."

"You're telling me," agreed Ron. "I was right there, and I felt like I wanted to strangle Voldemort for what he was doing to Harry."

"I think we were all crying, or wanted to," said Ginny. "Even Ron," she added pointedly.

Ron avoided answering directly. "Harry's been through some hard stuff," he said.

"Well, I cried a bit, and I don't mind admitting it," said Neville defiantly, as Ron looked down. Hermione looked at Neville admiringly and took his hand in support. "And I'm not even the one it happened to. Professor Dumbledore could have done what Harry did, but no one else could have. I'm sure of it."

Justin and Ernie were quiet again. Ginny said, "Yeah, that's kind of how we felt. There just isn't that much to say, at some point."

"It is hard to think of anything, compared to this," Justin agreed. He put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Hang in there, Harry. We're proud of you." Ernie just nodded.

"Thank you both, really," Harry said gratefully. They walked back to their table. Harry went back to working on sorting the mail, as he realized it was getting late, and he still hadn't finished his breakfast. He was able to take a few more bites before he had to head off to his class.

Harry had been looking forward to this class: it would be only his second class with the Slytherin and Gryffindor first years, both groups of which he felt particularly close to. He walked in the door two minutes before the class started, and everyone was there. As soon as they saw him, the students gave him a loud round of applause. He smiled as he put down his bag on the desk. "Thank you, but I've already been embarrassed enough for one morning. For one day, in fact." The students laughed.

They asked him about last night's dream, and he gave them an account almost identical to what Justin and Ernie had been told. He explained why he needed to stay calm, and answered their questions. The lesson continued the work on the Protection Charm, introduced the Disarming Charm, and talked about more basic elements of spellcasting. Harry wanted to introduce the ideas he'd heard from Dumbledore on Friday about the mental elements of spellcasting, but he wanted to wait until he had more of a chance to discuss it with Dumbledore.

Fifteen minutes before the end of the class, a Slytherin boy raised his hand. "Excuse me, sir, but I wanted to ask you about these..." He held up a snack from a Skiving Snackbox. "We still have them."

"Ah," Harry said. So much had been happening, he had forgotten about the whole Snackbox problem. "Has Malfoy asked for them back?"

"No, sir."

"Has he talked to you at all since last Friday?"

"No, sir."

Harry shook his head, annoyed. "He was supposed to get them back from you. Looks like it slipped his mind. Are you asking me what I think you should do?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm not sure I can answer that, because as a teacher, I'm supposed to encourage you not to do this. As a person, though, I'd say this: if you're going to do it, do it because you're concerned about what he might do if you don't. Who knows,

he could be mad at you if you do take them, for getting him more detention, or if you don't take them, for not doing what he said."

Hedrick raised his hand. "That's exactly what we thought, sir. We really aren't sure what to do. But I understand you can't tell us this. Do you mind if we talk about this for a minute?" Harry motioned for them to go ahead. The ten Slytherins huddled; a few Gryffindors leaned in to listen, and reported back to the rest.

The Slytherins returned to their desks. Hedrick said, "We're sorry, sir, but we're going to take them."

Harry nodded. "After you do, go to Madam Pomfrey. She'll probably complain about healthy kids going to her infirmary, but go there anyway." They ate the Snacks, bled, threw up, fainted, and headed off to the infirmary. Harry finished up the lesson with more Disarming practice.

His next lesson was similar, of course, except for the lack of a Snackbox problem. A Hufflepuff boy asked whether the Slytherins had eaten the Snacks. When told they had, most of the students cheered, or made other noises of satisfaction. Harry felt he should comment.

"I should tell you," he said, "that it's usually better not to do something that hurts someone else for your own satisfaction. I should tell you that we should avoid enjoying other people suffering, even if they deserve it. I should tell you that taking the high road is better." He paused. "But since it's Malfoy we're talking about..." The class roared its laughter. He smiled and put up a hand. "No, that's a joke, really," he said. "Look, no one deserves ten detentions more than Malfoy, that's for sure. He was warned, and he didn't do what I told him to do. But here's the problem.

"Last night, in my dream, Voldemort tried to encourage me to use the Cruciatus Curse on him." Some of the class gasped. "You might wonder why. The answer is, he wanted me to like it, he wanted me to want to do it more. In June, a Death Eater who I was fighting told me that the only way to do the spell, to make it work, is to enjoy the suffering of the other person. You have to want them to be in terrible pain, otherwise it won't work." The class looked very disturbed. "This is the most evil thing that can come from enjoying someone's suffering. Now, compared to that, enjoying Malfoy's suffering is very minor. He's really nasty, he deserves it. But it's a step, a first step along the road that leads to the Cruciatus Curse. Some people allow themselves to occasionally enjoy others suffering, in situations like this, and they're still good people. I'm no different than anyone else; I was happy when Malfoy lost his prefect's badge. But you have to be careful. You have to know that it's better not to do it than to do it."

There was a silence. Then a boy raised his hand and asked, "Did you want to do the Curse on Voldemort, sir?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I didn't. There would be no point; it would only hurt me. Causing him pain isn't how I'm going to beat him. He wants me to be more like him, but there's no way I'm going to do that."

As he headed off for lunch, he suddenly felt quite tired. Not surprising, he realized, as he'd had four straight days of four or five hours' sleep. Just one more night, he thought. He had a quiet lunch with Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville, then headed over to the staff room. He said hello and half-sat, half-flopped on a couch. John, sitting next to him, said, "We like to try to take it easy on the furniture, but we make exceptions for the sleep-deprived."

"Thanks, John. I feel like I could sleep, but it's probably not a good idea."

"Good thinking, you don't want to test your new spell until you're in your own bed, familiar surroundings," said Flitwick.

Harry looked at McGonagall quizzically. "Professor Dumbledore told the staff about it before our first lessons this morning," explained McGonagall.

"I'm quite excited about it, Harry," Flitwick continued. "It's an amazing development."

"I've been told, but to be honest, right now it's exciting to me only because it'll help cause this whole situation to end," Harry admitted. "Once I've had a good night's sleep, I'll think about what it means."

"Very understandable," agreed Professor Sprout sympathetically. "So, have you gotten through any of your mail?"

"No, I don't know when I'm going to do that. I've been kind of busy."

"Well, you should try to do it tonight," she urged him. "I'm sure most of them will be supportive, and it'll be good for you to know that people understand what you're trying to do."

Harry just nodded, but really didn't think he would do it. What if a lot were negative? He knew he was doing the right thing, and didn't want to have to read arguments against what he was doing, especially with Voldemort attacking him in his dreams every night. I'll look at them tomorrow morning if I'm successful, he thought.

"Oh, Harry," she continued, "I heard what you told my students about Schadenfreude. I'm very impressed, that someone so young has that perspective."

"I'm sorry, Professor, I told them about what?"

"Schadenfreude, Harry, is a German word which means 'pleasure derived from the suffering of others.'" She now spoke to the other teachers. "Apparently they were enjoying the idea that Malfoy would get ten more detentions, and Harry gave them a little talk, telling them that it's the first step down a path that leads to the Cruciatus Curse. As I said, I was very impressed."

Harry gave her a small smile. "Unfortunately, I'm now uniquely qualified to give that kind of lecture." He paused, then looked at McGonagall. "Professor, did you or Professor Dumbledore tell them about this morning's dream?"

"I gave the staff a general account, Harry, but of course I did not go into details, especially those of a personal nature," she said.

Sprout nodded. "She just said that he threw the most awful events of your life back in your face and taunted you, but you stayed rock-solid calm."

"She said she couldn't imagine anyone else except Professor Dumbledore being able to do what you did," added John.

Flitwick joined in. "Yes, and she said that it was the most remarkable thing she'd seen in many years, and that she was so proud of you that—"

"Yes, thank you, everyone," said an annoyed McGonagall, as the other teachers laughed; Harry joined in also. "I did relate to Harry my opinion of his actions."

"Yes, and she said you hugged her, Harry," added Flitwick. "Your reputation for bravery has been further enhanced." There was more laughter.

"Well, anyway," said Harry, almost having lost his original point, "I asked because he was trying to taunt me into using the Cruciatus Curse on him. I would never have considered it anyway, of course, but especially since I was trying to focus on love, it seemed really absurd. But it occurred to me in class, because the Cruciatus Curse is the ultimate example of... I'm sorry, what's that word?"

"Schadenfreude," Sprout repeated.

"Yes, thank you, of Schadenfreude. So, it wasn't hard to think that that kind of thing starts out with the easy stuff, like being happy about Malfoy."

"I am certainly not happy about it, Harry, I assure you," said McGonagall. "I am not looking forward to another ten hours with that..." She trailed off, unable to think of a word sufficiently polite yet accurate.

"By the way, how did you hear about that already, Professor?" Harry asked Sprout. "That only happened an hour ago."

Sprout chuckled. "Word of your lessons spreads quickly. In my case, one of my students told me that you told them about Voldemort's taunts. I asked a question, and the story came out. They don't need much encouragement to talk about you."

John grinned. "Or to date you."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I was wondering if that was going to come up. I couldn't believe they did that."

"They're right, you know," said John, seriously.

"Funny thing is, I never even said it. I just said I didn't think I could deal with having a girlfriend, and he just... divined the rest. I don't know if I even would have thought of it."

"Well, just don't think that you can't change your mind just because you said it in an article. You never know what's going to happen," advised John.

Harry changed the subject. He was beginning to tire of that subject, mostly because everyone was telling him the same thing. There was little he could say in response, because of his lack of experience. All he knew was that it was how he felt. He found Hermione's argument so far the most compelling, that he was not defying Voldemort if he refused a girlfriend out of fear of him.

The rest of Harry's afternoon seemed to go slowly, perhaps because the lesson was Potions. Harry almost fell asleep twice during the lecture portion of the class, only to be nudged by an anxious Hermione. At least one of those times Snape had obviously seen him, but to Harry's surprise, said nothing. After Potions, Harry and Hermione went back to his dormitory and rested. Fawkes sang, and Hermione fell asleep within minutes. At one point Ginny came in just to get something, but ended up lying in her bed too, entranced by Fawkes. "I'm not going to hear much phoenix song when I'm back in my dormitory, am I?" she asked.

After dinner, Hermione went to the library, while Harry and Ron had a fly, Fawkes on Harry's shoulder, not flying free as he had before. Harry wondered if he was being more closely guarded. They watched the Ravenclaw team having a practice, and Harry flew close enough to wave at Cho. One of Cho's teammates kidded her by yelling, "Hey, Harry, Cho's having a bit of trouble finding the Snitch, could you help her out?"

Harry spent the rest of the evening having a go at some Transfigurations homework, but he wasn't up for it. He was very tired, and was almost impatient for the night's dream to be upon him. He had asked Dumbledore to make their Occlumency lesson for 9:00, so he could get more sleep before the attack happened. Finally, 9:00 arrived, as did Dumbledore. They had their lesson, Harry feeling very comfortable and confident. The lesson concluded, Harry lay down, concentrated on Occlumency exercises, and listened to Fawkes's song. He was asleep in minutes.

Harry was suddenly in the graveyard. If he had been dreaming prior to this, he had forgotten it very quickly. He slipped easily into a state of love. He waited for Voldemort to appear.

"Good morning, Potter. Are you tiring of this yet?"

"I can think of other things I'd rather be doing, Voldemort, but I can do it for as long as you can. I think that answers your question."

"Can you, now? How long can you go without a good night's sleep?"

"Long enough." Harry thought of Hermione, of Ginny. The atmosphere was one of love. He felt pity for Voldemort, who would never know love.

"Brave words, Potter. And your actions... some might say they are brave, but I say they are foolish. You will bring down ruin upon yourself. You weaken every day."

Harry looked around and saw light on the horizon, ever so gradually getting stronger. "Sorry, Voldemort, but it's you that's weakening. Look over to the horizon. It's getting lighter. Your control of this... place is getting harder for you to maintain." He listened to the phoenix song.

"A little light in the sky is meaningless, Potter. You will be Cursed every night until you die; who knows how long it may take. Do you wish to reconsider?"

Harry prepared. "No, thanks. I never will, so you may as well get on with it."

"Very well, Potter. Crucio!"

As Voldemort said the word, Harry activated his shield. He prepared to visualize the shield and focus on its energy being made of love, but found the shield up before he expected it to be; merely wanting it up had summoned it. Harry concentrated on love as the Curse flew toward him. It hit the shield, dissipated a little, and then disappeared. Harry was totally unaffected.

Voldemort looked at him in disbelief. Harry said nothing, but simply looked at him with sadness and pity. Finally he said, "It's over, Voldemort. You've lost. There's nothing more you can do here."

Voldemort was furious, obviously thinking that nothing Harry could have done could have affected the spell. He raised his wand again. "Crucio!"

Again Harry's shield snapped on nearly without his conscious thought; the mere intention to use it seemed to summon it. Voldemort's Curse hit it and again dissipated, in thoroughly unspectacular fashion. Harry didn't think he had ever seen more frustration on anyone's face.

"You can try to Curse me all night long, Voldemort, it isn't going to work," Harry said, now feeling even calmer. "I'm going to keep saying your name, and encouraging others to do so. We're going to fight you, and we're going to win." He paused, and looked at the horizon. "Really getting bright out, isn't it? Not quite the right effect for a graveyard."

He stared at Voldemort, filled with sorrow and pity. "I wish there was something I could do for you, Voldemort, but I know you're beyond help. I wish I could help Tom Riddle. He must still be somewhere. Maybe it's not too late for him."

One more time, Voldemort tried. "Crucio!" Again the shield snapped on, and again there was no effect. Voldemort made a strangled noise of frustration and was gone. There was only the graveyard, with the sky a brilliant white, but comforting rather than blinding.

Suddenly Harry was awake. He looked to his right, and saw Hermione's worried face; he realized that she expected him to wake up screaming shortly. Her look

changed to confusion, then to happiness as he sat up. "Did you have the dream yet?" she asked quietly, so as not to wake the others. Her tone sounded like she felt it was something she dared not hope for.

Then Harry saw Dumbledore, who was again at the head of the bed. He had obviously been summoned by Fawkes, who had recognized that the dream was starting. Harry looked at both, and nodded. "I had it. The spell worked. It's over."

Still trying to stay quiet, Hermione leaped into the air in joy. She pulled Harry off the bed and hugged him fiercely. He hugged her back the same way. He whispered into her ear, "Thank you, thank you so much... you've been so good to me, all of you..." She squeezed him again in reply. They broke apart after a few more seconds.

He then looked at Dumbledore, who was standing now, looking pleased to have watched Harry and Hermione celebrating. Harry suddenly felt waves of love for this man who had cared for him, protected him, and taught him the connection between the word 'love' and what was in his heart. Filled with euphoria, he stepped toward Dumbledore and hugged him; Dumbledore hugged him back. Harry looked at him and quietly said, "I love you. I couldn't have done this without you. I'm so grateful..."

"If you love me, Harry, there is one thing you must do," said Dumbledore, with the familiar twinkle very obvious in his eyes. "You must call me Albus from time to time."

Harry chuckled, still deliriously happy. "I love you, Albus." Hermione looked on in delight.

"I love you too, Harry," Dumbledore replied. "I am very proud, and still a little amazed, at what you have accomplished. Would you like to go back to sleep now?"

Harry shook his head. In a way he was still tired, but was much too happy right then to sleep, and said so. "I should get the dream in the Pensieve before too much time goes by. But we don't need to wake the other professors, do we? They can see it later, there's no urgency."

Dumbledore nodded. "Let us watch it in the Pensieve now, then. I do not think the memory will fade, but if we watch it now, then I will remember it as well, so there will be no chance of anything lost. Hermione, I assume you will want to see it as well?"

She beamed at him. "Are you kidding? Of course! I want to see one of these that has a happy ending!"

They were all still speaking in whispers. Dumbledore whisked the Pensieve over, and Harry used his wand to extract the memory. Soon they were all in the graveyard, watching the dream. No one said anything until it was over, but Hermione gasped the first time she saw Harry's shield work completely. After Voldemort disappeared, the

sky stayed white, rather than reverting to the beginning of the dream, as it usually did. "I rather like this skyscape," Dumbledore mused.

"Oh, Harry, I'm so happy, so happy," exulted Hermione. "It's so amazing, what you've done. And that spell... not only is it effective, it's beautiful. I'll bet they end up calling it a Potter Shield, or something like that. They should, anyway."

"You of all people, Hermione," said an amused Dumbledore, "must know that spells are almost never named for the wizards who discover them. But these circumstances are unique, and they may merit a change in policy."

"Oh, yes, let's name it for me," Harry said sarcastically but humorously. "I'm not nearly famous enough as it is."

Hermione was still too exuberant to be annoyed. "But you deserve it! Look at what you had to go through to find it! That would have broken most people!"

Harry shrugged. "I'm not sure I care whether it gets named for me, really. If people can use it to avoid getting Cursed, that'll be more than enough for me."

Hermione looked puzzled. "That reminds me, Harry, what's the incantation for this spell? I never heard you say one."

He hadn't thought of that. "There isn't one. At least, not that I know of. I never used one, or thought of one. I just did the spell."

"I had noticed that, Hermione," said Dumbledore. "In Harry's case, as his spells are operating at 100% effectiveness whether vocalized or not, it was not necessary for him to employ any particular incantation. If there is one, it may come to Harry at some point when he is not thinking about it."

"Professor, are any other spells made up of the energy of love?" asked Harry.

"No, Harry. This is the only one."

"I have to wonder now why nobody ever thought of that. I mean, love is so powerful, it seems obvious when you look at it."

"The discovery of spells is more art than science. Look how you came up with yours. I have no doubt that people have thought of it before, but you are the first to actually find one. Unknown spells are very, very hard to find."

"I guess I can see now why you found this so amazing yesterday. It's funny how it showed up just when I needed it most."

"It is really not strange at all, Harry," Dumbledore explained. "Think about how families find out that their children are magical. Even without a wand, the children summon magic when they most need it: when in danger, terrified, or angry. This situation was roughly analogous to that."

"Professor, now that this has worked in the dream, we need to make sure it works in the real world. We should do a test."

"That makes sense, but the only way to do a test is for someone to use the Curse on you."

"It doesn't matter; I'll block it. You said spells work the same way in reality as in dreams. You saw this. You know it'll work," Harry said stubbornly.

Dumbledore hesitated, then nodded. "Very well. I will arrange for a preliminary demonstration tonight. The Ministry will want to send an observer. If the spell is successful, as I am sure it will be, there will be another, more formal, test of it shortly thereafter.

"We should exit the Pensieve now, so you two can get to sleep. It will not be strictly necessary, but I will watch over Harry for the rest of the night, Hermione. You will not be bothered any further by Voldemort, I am nearly certain. But I will not be sleeping much anyway; I have much to think about. I will stay."

Harry, Hermione, and Dumbledore left the Pensieve, and were back in the quiet of the boys' dormitory. Harry and Hermione exchanged whispered 'good nights' and got into their beds. Dumbledore sat in his chair, having moved it away from Harry's bed. Fawkes started singing. Getting comfortable in his bed, knowing for the first time in days that his sleep would not be interrupted, Harry focused on love, and his friends-not as a relaxation technique or anti-Voldemort weapon, but just because he wanted to, to appreciate what his friends had done for him, had helped him do. He was again asleep quickly.

Harry awoke to see that the sun was up; he had missed seeing sunlight when he awoke for a few days. He sat up, remembered what had happened, and jumped out of bed. Dumbledore was still there, awake, in his chair. All the others were awake, and broke into wide smiles when they saw him.

"Hermione and Professor Dumbledore told us everything, of course," said Ginny, walking towards Harry. "We're so happy, we're so excited..." She threw her arms around him in triumph.

"Thank you, Ginny, thank you for everything you did. You were wonderful."

"I was so happy to do it, Harry. We all were." She released him and stepped back. Harry stepped forward to hug Hermione. "Did you get enough sleep? Are you okay for today?" he asked.

She nodded, "Yes, thanks," and let go.

Harry approached Ron, a wide grin on his face. Ron grinned back and extended his hand. Harry just shook his head, still smiling.

Ron figured it out, and rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on..."

"Too bad, Ron," said Harry. He stepped forward to hug Ron, who sighed and hugged Harry back. "Thank you, Ron. Especially for bringing me back that first night."

They stepped apart. Ron's face was now a bright red, but he smiled. "No problem, mate." Harry saw the girls trying not to laugh at Ron's discomfort.

Harry moved on to Neville, who didn't flinch or look uncomfortable. He hugged Neville, who returned the gesture. Harry stepped back and said, "Thanks for staying, Neville. It meant a lot to me." Neville just nodded, smiling and overwhelmed.

Dumbledore stepped forward. "Harry, the school will want to know what happened. The first years, not having heard you scream, will have relayed that information to others, but people will want a few details. So you will not be besieged with requests, I thought I would make a brief presentation at breakfast. I would also like to show a small amount of the dream to the school, to illustrate things properly. I hope that will be all right with you."

"Sure, sir, whatever you think is best," Harry agreed. He would be happy not to have to tell it twenty times, enjoyable as this story would be.

"Very well, then... if you will change into your day clothes, I will escort you down to the Great Hall, where I believe most everyone is waiting." The students closed the curtains on their beds and changed clothes, then followed Dumbledore out.

They entered the Great Hall to find virtually everyone there; all the teachers were present at the teachers' table, including Hagrid, which was a rarity. A loud buzz went up when people caught sight of Harry and the others. Dumbledore strode to the center of the teachers' table.

"I wish at this time to give you all some information which will be of great general interest," he announced, using the magical microphone. "I am pleased to announce that Harry had a dream encounter involving Voldemort last night, but was not Cursed. He has prevailed, and will not be disturbed again."

A huge cheer burst forth from the audience. Plates and cups were banged against tables and each other. A few people hugged. Except for Snape, the teachers applauded enthusiastically. The din went on for almost a whole minute.

"Yes, we are all most gratified," agreed Dumbledore when the Hall got quiet enough for him to continue. "But the means of his victory is perhaps even more remarkable than the victory itself. Harry did not dodge or avoid Voldemort's Cruciatus Curse. He fashioned a defense against it.

"To properly understand what I am saying, it will be better for you to see it with your own eyes. Some of you may know that there are means to retrieve images and scenes from dreams. We have done so with Harry's dream last night. It will be displayed in the air, above me, with audio.

"I warn you that Voldemort will appear and speak in these images. The images begin approximately thirty seconds into Harry's dream." Dumbledore waved his wand,

and Harry saw himself and Voldemort, in the graveyard, floating above the teachers' table. There were quite a few gasps from the audience.

The images moved. Harry saw himself say, "Sorry, Voldemort, but it's you that's weakening..." There were gasps again; Harry suspected they were due to his calm, or perhaps that he addressed Voldemort directly by his name. They gasped again when Voldemort threatened Harry, and yet again when Harry calmly defied him. Harry had to remember that even what was being shown here, while by no means the worst of what he had gone through, was probably very frightening to the other students. They had never seen Voldemort before. Harry wondered if by showing this, Dumbledore was trying to accomplish something similar to what Harry was doing with the name: to diminish fear with familiarity.

Then Voldemort hit Harry with the Curse, which Harry's shield stopped. Each of these actions caused more gasps. Harry glanced down the Gryffindor table and saw a row of stunned looks as people watched, mesmerized. As the dream images continued, Harry saw that Dumbledore had edited out what he said near the end about Tom Riddle. He supposed that Dumbledore felt that it would not be understood properly unless one knew what was said in the third dream. At the end of the dream, when Voldemort vanished, defeated, there was only silence in the Hall. Harry had wondered whether there might be applause, but he gathered that everyone was still too stunned.

"Quite remarkable, both Harry's composure and the defense he used. Now, I will summon up a closer image of how Harry appeared just before the first attempted Curse by Voldemort. Harry will now activate his spell," continued Dumbledore, as the Hall watched Harry's shield suddenly appear. "Now watch carefully as Voldemort's Curse reaches the shield." Everyone watched the Curse dissipate and fizzle quietly.

"Excuse me, sir," shouted a seventh year Ravenclaw, "what spell was that?"

"I cannot give it a name," Dumbledore explained, "for it is something that Harry... invented, or discovered, whichever you like... yesterday. It is a previously unknown spell, and it is capable of stopping the Cruciatus Curse, something heretofore believed to be impossible."

Again there was no sound in the Hall, just a stunned silence. Dumbledore continued, "The first test of this spell will take place tonight in the Great Hall at 7:00 p.m., after dinner. Anyone wishing to stay and view the test may do so. That is all for now. Congratulations again to Harry, and thank you for your attention."

Dumbledore stepped away from the podium. There was silence for a few more seconds, then a few students started clapping. Gradually, more and more joined, and finally there was a thunderous ovation. Hermione, Ron, Ginny, and Neville were looking

at him proudly. He smiled at them, then closed his eyes and let the feelings wash over him. He reflected that what he was truly happy about was that Voldemort was gone from his mind, but this... this was almost as good.

The applause finally died down, and Harry started on his food. There was a lot of talking in the Hall, as people exchanged impressions and speculations. The owls came in, and dropped another twenty pieces of mail in front of Harry. He realized that he could now look at yesterday's mail without fear of the effect it would have on his morale. His friends didn't talk to him, sensing that he needed to eat in peace.

Harry had gotten through most of his food when he saw Ernie and Justin walk up; Harry stood to greet them. "Hi, guys," Harry said. "I wanted to thank you again for coming by every day. Like everything else, it helped."

They looked at him and nodded, but didn't say anything. Finally Justin said, "You know, it's kind of hard to know what to say, after seeing what we just saw. I feel like asking you if you plan to walk on water next."

Harry laughed. "If it'd help me get away from Voldemort, I'd give it a try, believe me. I'm a bit surprised too, especially about the spell. It was such a strange thing."

"I see your 100 came in handy," said Ernie. "I noticed that your spell doesn't have an incantation, but for you, it doesn't need one, does it?"

Harry nodded. "Bet you're one of the very few people that picked up on that, Ernie. No, no incantation came to me. I kind of wish it had, just so other people could use it more easily. But I was happy to get what I got, that's for sure."

"So, you have no idea where it came from?" Justin asked.

Harry shook his head. "It just came to me, out of the clear blue sky. I've never had anything like that happen before. When you're in a situation like that, a lot of times you don't think, you just do things."

"I pray, Harry, that I'll never find myself in a situation like that," Justin said. "But I did get to see what you were talking about yesterday. He's just... like you said, Hermione, evil. He gave me chills."

"By comparison, the dream you saw was mild," Hermione replied. "Yesterday's was much worse, much harder for Harry. Professor Dumbledore thinks that's how he came up with the spell, that he was forced to... reach deeper into whatever abilities and resources we have. Harry was pushed really, really hard, and that's what he came up with. It's one of those things about people that we don't really understand all that well."

Ernie nodded. "I feel like there's a few things that I don't really understand all that well... like how Harry did what we just saw him do. But maybe there are things we're not meant to understand." He extended a hand, which Harry shook.

"Well, Harry, there's one thing I can say for sure," said Justin, shaking Harry's hand as well. "In that interview, you said that it was strange being famous when you did nothing to merit it. You're not going to be able to say that anymore; at this point, you'd be famous even if you weren't Harry Potter. And deservedly so. Congratulations."

"Thanks, you two. See you tonight?"

"Yeah, I don't think we'd miss it," Justin said as they walked away.

The day was a strange one for Harry. He still felt happy and triumphant, but he felt that people were treating him strangely. His students especially were more subdued than usual; they seemed to be gaping at him half the time, and nervous when he called on them. He gave Ron and Hermione his impressions at lunch. They smiled.

"I know your modesty wouldn't have let this occur to you, Harry," said Hermione, "but think about how this looks to them. All they've heard all their lives about Voldemort is how terrifying he is, how he's to be feared, how many he killed, and so on. Then they start your classes. First off, you're the Boy Who Lived, so that's pretty impressive right there. Then, you-unique in wizarding society, except for Dumbledore-use his name, and encourage them to do so. To them, that already makes you really brave, really amazing. Now you invent a new, powerful spell, and use it to defeat Voldemort in a battle of wills, facing horrible pain. To them, you might as well be Merlin, or something. They're probably in awe of you right now. It'll go away, hopefully, but you'll have to deal with it for awhile."

"Would it help if I made fun of you a bit, Harry?" Ron offered. "It'd be tough on me, but hey, anything for a friend."

Harry chuckled. "Well, don't stretch yourself. Only if something really good comes up. Like if I get another scroll."

"Well, we can't really hope for that, can we," Ron said. "Ah, that was a good one."

"With your classes, I'd suggest maybe you try more humor, make sure you make some jokes if you can," suggested Hermione. "It might humanize you more."

Harry nodded. "I try to do that anyway, but I'll keep it in mind."

After lunch, Harry went to the staff room, as usual. He was applauded as he entered, and got pats on the back from John and Flitwick, and a kiss on the cheek from Sprout. He was asked how he was doing, and told them what he had told Hermione and Ron. "Hermione thinks... this is embarrassing to say, but she thinks they're in awe of me."

Flitwick smiled. "Well, we're in awe of you, Harry, why shouldn't they be?"

Harry couldn't help but grin. "Well, I think you're just teasing me, but-"

Flitwick interrupted him. "Anyone in this room who thinks I'm teasing Harry, raise your hand." Nobody did. "Harry, I don't know if you're aware of how what you did looks, but... watching this morning, I practically had an accident just looking at Voldemort." This got a chuckle around the room. "He inspires terror in mature, adult wizards. I'm not any kind of coward, but I couldn't imagine myself doing what I saw you do this morning. I just don't think I would have it in me. We know you're only sixteen, we know there's still a lot you have to learn and experience. But what you did is literally awe-inspiring. You have to understand that." Other teachers nodded.

Harry found it hard to believe, but decided not to argue it. "But even if that's true, you would be in awe of what I did, not in awe of me. You all would still tease me, treat me the same way. But the students are acting like they're in awe of me, like I'm some... I don't know, but something. I want them to look at me like they did last week."

"They will, Harry, you just have to give them time," advised Sprout. "You taught them within a very short time of them seeing you do something that was... well, as Professor Flitwick said, awe-inspiring."

"You should have seen what he did on Monday morning, in the fourth dream," said McGonagall. "This one looked easy by comparison, I assure you."

Harry nodded. "Also, today I had the comfort of knowing I had that spell, and that it would probably work. I was actually looking forward to him trying the Curse, so I could find out for sure."

John yawned ostentatiously. "No, nothing at all awe-inspiring about that."

"By the way, for that demonstration tonight, who's going to do the actual Curse?" asked Harry. "I hadn't thought about that." The other teachers looked uncomfortable.

"Professor Dumbledore was just in here discussing that," said McGonagall, a cloud seeming to form over her face. "It is his intention to do it himself."

"What??" Harry almost screamed. He jumped to his feet. "Absolutely not! No! He can't!"

"We offered similar opinions, Harry," McGonagall said softly. "He was insistent. He would not ask anyone to do this, although several of us volunteered to do it. He felt he could not shirk this."

"He's damn well going to shirk this," Harry said furiously. "I'll back out, I won't do this if he's that determined. I won't let him. He can't do this." He stormed out of the staff room, heading for Dumbledore's office.

He knocked and walked in; it looked like Snape and Dumbledore had been having an animated conversation. Normally Harry would have been curious as to what it was about, but now he didn't care. Dumbledore turned to Harry.

"Harry, what can I-"

"You're not doing this," Harry said hotly. "I won't let you. I'll back out of the whole thing."

Dumbledore paused, regarding Harry with fondness and patience. "I did plan on telling you myself, but-"

"I asked them. They told me."

"I see. Harry, there are some things one cannot ask others to do-"

For the third time in a row, Harry interrupted Dumbledore. "You wouldn't have to ask them, they said they volunteered. And I can't let you. I can't do it."

Dumbledore looked at Harry with affection. "I understand, and I appreciate it. But what kind of leader would I be if I delegated out unpleasant tasks to those under my command?"

"You would be," Snape said, "the kind who recognizes reality, the reality that tasks are best performed by those who can best accomplish them, with the least difficulty. Professor Potter," he said, turning to Harry, "who do you feel should perform the Curse?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Harry asked in exasperation. "You, of course."

"I have been telling this to the headmaster for the past ten minutes, but he will not accept what I say. Perhaps he will accept it from you."

Harry's eyes flashed. "He will accept it from me, or I'm not doing it." He turned to Dumbledore. "I'm serious."

Dumbledore was still patient. "Harry, imagine a situation in which someone had to Curse Ginny Weasley, and it had to be you, Ron, or Hermione. Would you allow one of them to perform such a task?"

Harry had to pause. "I wouldn't want to," he admitted, "but if she pleaded with me to let it be someone else, and there was someone much better suited to do it... I'd like to think I would. If it would mean that much to her that I not do it."

"Why do you think, Harry, that Professor Snape is better suited to do this?"

Harry was almost speechless; this seemed so obvious. "The person doing the Cursing has to want to cause the other person to suffer. I know how you'd feel, doing that. You love me! He doesn't even like me! Do you know how many times I've seen him look at me as though he'd like nothing better than to do the Curse?" Realizing what he'd said, he quickly looked at Snape and said, "No offense."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "None taken." They looked at Dumbledore.

"Harry, what you have just said is precisely the reason that I do not want Professor Snape doing this."

Snape seemed very frustrated. "I am in control, Headmaster. You fear needlessly. It is only a few Curses, done for a very specific reason, under controlled

circumstances. You would be emotionally damaged, while I would not, which is the point I assume Professor Potter was making."

"And my point, Severus, was that there are things that Harry does not know; he cannot evaluate the cost or risks to you."

"Even if he were told, he could not do so. But he has intuitively grasped the cost to you. You and I know the effect on me, and only your stubbornness prevents you from recognizing that the cost to you is much higher than it is to me. Even if he knew, he would choose the same." He paused, looking at Dumbledore. "And that disturbs you. You would not want him to choose your interests over mine. Headmaster, he loves you. What else can he do? If you love him, you should do as he wishes." Harry was stunned; he had never heard Snape have the concern for anyone that he was displaying for Dumbledore, nor did he imagine he would ever hear Snape using the word 'love.'

Dumbledore gazed at Snape levelly. "I love you both, Severus. Perhaps in different ways, but I would not easily put my interests above yours, or even his above yours."

"And you care nothing for the distress you know it would cause those who care about you?" Snape pressed. "You can suffer doing what I could do, in which case those you care about will suffer too, including him," he said, pointing to Harry. "Or, you can suffer the regret of letting another shoulder what you feel is your burden, in which case, you suffer alone. Which is better?"

Dumbledore looked at Harry. "This is one of the classic types of moral dilemmas, especially for people in leadership positions. You will experience it one day, no doubt sooner than you would like. If you love those under your command, you will wish to take for yourself the most difficult tasks. But if they love you, they will wish to do it for you.

"I assure you, Harry, that this is not as clear-cut as it seems to you. There is information you do not have, which I cannot tell you at this time without Professor Snape's permission. This is not as easy for him as you think it is."

"But is he right, sir?" Harry asked Dumbledore, his tone near pleading. "Is the cost to him lower than it is to you?"

"We cannot say definitively, Harry, in situations like this. But he may be correct."

"I am correct," said Snape softly. "You know it. Trust me, Albus."

Dumbledore looked at Snape in surprise. If Harry had to guess, he would have guessed that this was the first time Snape had ever called him that. Dumbledore closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again. "Very well, Severus. You will perform the Curse."

"Thank you, Headmaster," Snape said.

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said to Dumbledore. He turned to leave, as did Snape, who followed him out. They walked together; obviously both were headed to the staff room. "Thank you, Professor," said Harry sincerely.

"I did not do this for you, Professor," said Snape evenly. "I did it for him."

Harry met his eyes as they walked. "I know. That's why I'm thanking you."

Snape seemed to consider this. "You're welcome," he said, just before they entered the staff room.

They walked in, and all eyes were on them; the staff obviously knew what the discussion had been about. Snape said nothing, so Harry said it instead. "Professor Snape will perform the Curse tonight."

There were a few low whistles in the room. Harry looked confused, which McGonagall noticed. "I have been at Hogwarts for forty years, Harry, and I can count the number of times the headmaster has changed his mind on the fingers of one hand. I would be most interested to know how it was managed."

Snape glanced at Harry, a silent request not to elaborate. Harry simply said, "We ganged up on him. It was hard for him to say no to both of us."

"That must have been quite some ganging up," mused Flitwick.

"You should get your things ready, Harry, as you have a class in a few minutes," said McGonagall. "Mine, you may recall. I assume you have done all your homework and practice?"

"Would you really assume that?" asked Harry, deadpan. The others laughed. "Actually, I did have a go at it last night, but for some reason, I couldn't keep my mind on it. I imagine I'll do better next week."

"I daresay you will," she said, to more laughter. She got up, and they left the staff room together.

There was an atmosphere of expectation at dinner in the Great Hall. Harry had just finished eating, but like everyone else, he wasn't going anywhere. It would not be long before the demonstration of the new spell would take place. Harry had little doubt that it would work, so he was not worried, but he could tell his friends were. He tried to reassure them, but they were not convinced. Finally, he said, "Do you think that McGonagall and Dumbledore would let this happen if they thought there was any chance of it not working?" They saw his point, but were still not put totally at ease.

"Can I join you guys for a minute?" They looked up and saw Hugo Brantell smiling down at them. They gave him a cheerful hello, and Ginny and Hermione

separated so he could squeeze in. "Ah, a good spot, right between two attractive girls," he said.

"Hey, that's not fair, you'll know whether we believe you or not," said Ginny.

Hugo did an impression of an overblown reporter, stage-whispering, "I'm here at the Gryffindor house table here at Hogwarts, the site of the most incredible five days in wizarding history, and I'm talking with the man of the moment, the one on whom all eyes are on, the one to whom others look for guidance and leadership. So, tell me, Ron, how does it feel?" All the Gryffindors near them burst out laughing, including Ron.

Ron ran with the joke. "Well, I don't mind telling you, Hugo, it's a little tense. I have to sit here and watch, and you know how hard that can be. But I'm bearing up well, thank you very much for asking."

"I assume you're here covering this, not just as a spectator?" Harry asked.

Hugo nodded. "I'm not sure if you're aware of this, but it's a huge story. This could be an enormous development in wizardry. Assuming everything goes as planned tonight, I'll be here tomorrow too."

"What happens tomorrow?" asked Ginny.

"It's a little bit similar to tonight, only more formal and without such a big crowd. Tonight is just to prove the spell exists informally, so the Ministry knows there should be a formal display of it. Tomorrow, three Aurors will come here, and test the spell, make measurements, ask Harry detailed questions about the spell, bother him about why there's no incantation, and so forth." Harry smiled, but Hugo saw beneath it. "I'm sorry, Harry, I know you're not happy about that. I think it'll come with time."

Harry nodded. "I just want people to be able to use it. The annoying thing is that people really can't practice it. You just have to use it in the situation and hope it works."

"Well, you did last night. Professor Dumbledore showed me the images he showed everyone at breakfast. You did pretty well."

"Thanks, Hugo," said Harry.

Ron sputtered. "Pretty well? You must be kidding-"

Hugo started to laugh. "Yes, I am, Ron. Just curious, does anyone know the idea of my joke?"

"You were saying what Harry wishes everyone would say," supplied Hermione, "instead of telling him what an amazing, awe-inspiring, unforgettable, tremendous, and stupendously brave thing he managed to do, which he's been hearing all day and is getting sick of."

"You really do know the answer to everything, don't you?" smiled Hugo, as Hermione looked at him in feigned annoyance. He turned to Harry and said, "After it's over, I wanted to interview you about it, just a few questions. Well, no more than a dozen, anyway. Professor Dumbledore said I should do it so that all the students can hear. I wanted to make sure that was okay with you."

Harry smiled. "Well, is it?"

Hugo chuckled at the challenge. "You shouldn't test me, Harry, your eyes are too expressive. Ah, I see you've been told that recently. Anyway, you're not thrilled about it, but you recognize that people are legitimately interested, so you'll do it for that reason. If it was strictly for people's entertainment, you'd be looking for the nearest door."

"Seeing Professor Lockhart at a young age kind of put me off the idea of wanting publicity," Harry agreed.

"So, Hugo," asked Ron, "have you talked to many people here yet today? What's the mood like?"

"You probably know too, Ron, but I know you think I might see something you don't. People are overwhelmed at what Harry did; frankly, myself included, but more or less everyone. Some older Slytherins acted like it was no big deal, but they were completely lying." Everyone chuckled. "I could tell you in more detail, but I'm pretty sure Harry doesn't want to know."

Ron snorted. "Of course he doesn't, why do you think I asked you?" Harry smiled and playfully shoved Ron. "Can you imagine, Harry," asked Ron, "what Fred and George would be saying if they were here?"

Ginny giggled. "They'd be talking about where your statue was going to go up, taking your measurements for it. Or telling the first years that you were born on a mountaintop in a thunderstorm. They'd really be having fun."

"I visited their shop today, by the way," said Hugo. "They made lots of jokes, and were very understated about it, but they were thrilled about the mention in the article, and they're very proud of you. Even you two," he added to Ron and Ginny.

Forgetting who she was talking to, Ginny asked, "They said that?"

"Of course not, Ginny," replied Hugo with amusement. "This was me cheating. But they did say something about being glad there were still two Weasleys on the Quidditch team."

Ginny's response was cut off by Dumbledore's magically enhanced voice. "May I have your attention, please. We will now witness a brief demonstration of the spell which you were shown at breakfast this morning. In attendance are two Ministry of Magic Aurors, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Hubert Dawlish, and journalist Hugo Brantell. Harry, would you step up here, please?" Harry got up and walked to where the

teachers' table usually was; parts of it had been moved so people could see more clearly.

"Harry, is there anything you need before we proceed?"

"I think I'm okay, just give me a minute to get ready," Harry said. He closed his eyes and felt love. It seemed almost palpable, in this large room, the support of his fellow students and fellow teachers. He could sink into it easily, he could feel it all around him. He took out his wand and nodded to Dumbledore. "I'm ready."

"Very well. I shall count down from five to zero. On zero, Professor Snape will issue the Curse. Five, four..."

Harry had forgotten about the crowd, he was peaceful and comfortable.

"Three, two, one..."

Harry still felt relaxed, but he felt the atmosphere change, only a tiny bit, as if things were getting dark. Somehow, he thought, he would know the spell was coming even if not for the countdown.

"Zero-"

"Crucio!" As Snape said the word, as in the dream, the shield snapped on almost automatically. The spell hit the shield and quickly dissipated. The shield lingered for a few seconds, and went off. The crowd erupted in cheers. Harry smiled, though he had fully expected this. He looked over at his friends, very happy to see them so happy for him.

Dumbledore said, "Thank you. Most impressive, Harry. We will now do it one more time, for confirmation. I will count down from five again. Five, four, three, two, one, zero."

"Crucio", Snape shouted. Again Harry's shield went up, and again there was no damage. Again Harry felt as though something was changing in the air just before the spell was cast, but he wondered whether he was imagining it. The students cheered again. To Harry's surprise, Professor Snape walked up to him and offered his hand; Harry shook it, wondering if this was part of a ritual involved with such demonstrations. Dumbledore shook his hand too, then McGonagall. Dumbledore addressed the crowd.

"Thank you for your attention. Mr. Brantell would like to ask Harry a few questions now, and I thought there might be some interest in this, so I have arranged for the audio to be enhanced. Hugo?"

Hugo walked up to where Harry was standing. "Harry, may I ask you a few questions?"

"Depends, do they have anything to do with girlfriends?"

Hugo smiled as the crowd laughed. "Don't tempt me, Harry. First of all, can you describe how this spell came to you?"

"I wish I could, Hugo. It was just there, that's really the best way to say it. It was as if I just got this idea, fully formed, and did what it felt like I should do."

"Can you say exactly what you did? How would you describe the process of casting the spell?"

"When the idea first came to me, I imagined a shield that totally surrounded me. I imagined it looking bright, and made out of the energy of love, which is probably the most unusual thing about it."

The audience murmured a bit, suggesting that they thought it was strange. Hugo asked, "What made you think of doing that, Harry?"

Harry took a deep breath. He was less than thrilled to explain the details publicly, but had already decided, with some encouragement from Hermione, that the spell was too important not to make the information about it public. "This goes back to my whole approach to dealing with Voldemort. The second time I met him, last June in the Ministry of Magic, he tried to possess me, to put his... spirit, I guess, into my body and control it. It was horrible, like being lost in a sea of evil. After a few seconds, I felt like death would be better than existing like that. Thinking of that made me think of... people I loved who had died, that I would be with them, and that made me feel love. As soon as that happened, Voldemort retreated, he left my body, and I was myself again. Later, Professor Dumbledore explained that Voldemort left my body because he can't tolerate the presence of love. His... maybe essence is a better word... is one of pure evil. It can't tolerate being around love, because love reminds it of how empty and barren it is. So Professor Dumbledore told me that this was my best defense against Voldemort, to avoid being taken over, to try to stop dreams and other intrusions.

"So, even before the dreams started, I was trying to do mental exercises, to be able to summon up feelings of love, to focus on them. It wasn't easy; I was raised in a home where love wasn't expressed, so it wasn't familiar to me. I wasn't comfortable with it. But, it's amazing how the possibility of having to deal with Voldemort is a great motivator. I put a lot of effort into working it through, to being more comfortable with it. Ginny and Hermione were a great help," he said, looking at them. "I guess this is easier for girls. Ron, on the other hand, was no help at all." The crowd laughed, as did Ron. "But most helpful of all was Professor Dumbledore, which won't surprise anyone who's spent any time around him. Both his example and his advice helped me. So, when the dreams started, I knew what I had to do. During the dreams, I focused as hard as I could on feelings of love, of being calm. I knew it was the only way to get through what I had to go through.

"Now... and I'm just now getting to the answer to your question, Hugo... in the dreams, I was constantly focusing on love, trying to create an atmosphere that he

wouldn't like. He tried to possess me again in the first dream, but doing deliberately what I did accidentally at the Ministry of Magic, I was able to push him out. I couldn't push him out of my dreams quite so easily, but I knew eventually I could do it. The hard part was withstanding the Curse every night. So, when I had the inspiration for the shield on the fourth night, it was already second nature to be focusing on love, so it seemed totally natural to me to have the shield energy be composed of love, which I had come to think of as a source of energy, something real. It had driven Voldemort out of my mind; it seemed real to me. So that was what I did. It wasn't something I planned. It was as if my mind knew what it should do without me thinking about it."

A hush had fallen over the crowd. Hugo said, "Harry, that was probably the most personal thing anyone's ever said to me in front of three hundred people." The crowd chuckled. "Why did you go into so much detail about this? Love isn't something that most people talk about like this."

Harry smiled. "First of all, Hugo, the Hogwarts community is very sensitive and understanding. I'm sure no one will be teasing me about this at all." This got a big laugh. Hugo interrupted to say, "Yes, and I'm sure that someone who's come to understand and focus on love will not be of any particular interest to the girls at Hogwarts." The crowd again laughed.

"See, it's already started," Harry said. "But to answer your question, there are two reasons. First, it's not going to make any sense to say I focused on love unless I explain the background, why it was necessary to do that. Secondly, this is important for people to know, much more important than any embarrassment I might feel in talking about it. I now realize what a powerful weapon love is, and if anyone doesn't believe it, all they have to do is look at the shield. The Cruciatus Curse was thought to be unblockable, but love is so powerful that it could do it. It could cause Voldemort to retreat. Who knows what else it might do? People have to know."

"Has this focus had any effect on you in your day-to-day life?"

"I've been around you long enough, Hugo, to know that you already know the answer, you just want me to say what it is." Hugo nodded, and Harry chuckled. "Yes, it's had a great side benefit. I feel more relaxed, calmer, less easily agitated than before. Last year I was on edge a lot, testing the patience of my friends," he said, looking at Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. "I felt a lot better this year, before the attacks, and I'm sure it was because of that that once the attacks started, I was able to get through them without despairing. It was a really difficult situation."

"Another of your famous understatements, Harry, but never mind. So you feel this focus has made you a happier person?"

"Yes, I definitely think so. I had no idea that it would, I had no idea about love, to be honest. I just worked as hard as I could to follow Professor Dumbledore's advice, and this was the result. I'm very grateful to him." He looked at Dumbledore, who smiled back at him.

"Harry, I talked to some people in the scientific community today, and they said that if tonight's test proved successful, it would be the most important new spell in three hundred years. How does that make you feel, being the one who discovered it?"

"I guess 'pleased and amazed' would describe it. I feel like you expect me to say 'proud,' but since it came to me without my thinking about it, I don't feel like it's 'mine,' but just something I found, that I was very lucky to have found."

Hugo shook his head. "Harry, you've made me take off my reporter's hat for a moment. Your accomplishment was partly in finding the spell, but mostly in managing to survive the situation with your spirit intact. For four nights you had no defense against the Curse, but you didn't back down. Most people would have never gotten that far, far enough to find the spell in the first place."

Harry started to answer, but was drowned out by a quickly building wave of applause. Harry smiled with embarrassment as he saw that the teachers had joined it. "Thank you," he said when the applause faded. "But I can't say it enough, and I'll say it again: Professor Dumbledore, my friends, Fawkes, the teachers, and all of you... helped me keep my spirits up. I benefited from your help more than you can probably understand. I knew I wasn't alone. It helped me focus, and I'm grateful to everyone."

"Thank you, Harry," said Hugo, indicating that the interview was over. The crowd applauded one more time. Harry stepped down and headed toward the Gryffindor table. He reflected again on how lucky he was, despite all he had to go through, as he was patted and congratulated by his friends.

Harry got a good night's uninterrupted sleep that night. Dean and Seamus moved back into the dormitory; Fawkes sang again as a precaution, and Harry knew that Fawkes would retrieve Dumbledore if it was necessary. But he knew it wouldn't be, and it wasn't. At breakfast, Hermione told him that she was ready with the communications arrangements he'd asked for, and that she'd managed to find Pansy alone to tell her to meet Harry at 4:00. Harry found one of his Slytherin first years and told them to meet him at 4:15 and to keep it quiet.

He took his Invisibility Cloak and the Marauder's Map with him to his afternoon Charms class, so he could go directly to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. He arrived at a few minutes before four to find Pansy already there.

Ron and Hermione had come with him, and they stayed in the outer room to stand lookout as Harry and Pansy retreated to the office.

"How are you doing, Pansy?"

"Oh, Harry... watching the demonstration last night, the images yesterday morning... do you have any idea how hard it was for me to keep my feelings off my face? To pretend I felt like Malfoy did? When I was so amazed and proud of you that I could burst? And what you said about love yesterday, it was just... inspirational. It was beautiful."

"Thank you, Pansy. I'm really glad you feel that way. But now that this is over, you should be able to keep your true face hidden better."

She nodded. "I'm just so glad for your sake it is over. I was so happy to hear it yesterday, I almost cheered along with everyone else. You should have seen Malfoy when Dumbledore showed those images. He was so scared when he saw the Dark Lord, I thought he was going to wet himself." Harry laughed. "I shouldn't talk, though, I was pretty scared myself. But I don't pretend otherwise. And when you used your spell, in the dream, and told him that he'd lost, Malfoy was so stunned, it was funny to watch. He just couldn't believe it."

"Poor Malfoy, his hero defeated. So what's it like in Slytherin these days?"

"Malfoy's keeping a very low profile. What you accomplished has caused most Slytherins, even maybe half the older ones, to abandon the pretense that they agree with Malfoy about you. They say things like, 'I don't care for Potter personally, but what he did was pretty amazing,' that sort of thing. The younger ones are really open in their support, talking about it in the common room. Malfoy's been spending a lot of time in his dormitory, which I'm really pleased with, since I can't go in there. It's safe to say that nobody has to fear saying nice things about you, which is great."

"I'm really glad, Pansy. That was all I wanted in the first place. By the way, the first years will be here in a few minutes. You have to understand that they may be reluctant to believe that you're with them. They've seen only the opposite from you."

She nodded. "I know that, I'm ready to try to convince them."

Hermione came in. "Harry, they're all here."

"Okay, thanks. Pansy, you stay here, I want to talk to them for a minute first. Come out when you hear me ask for you. Ron'll warn you if someone's coming; grab the Cloak out of the bag if you need to. I'll ask for you in a minute." She nodded again, and he walked out into the classroom.

He could tell that the Slytherin first years were excited to see him. He smiled and sat down near where they were standing. They spent a few minutes giving him their reactions to his recent actions, after which Harry got down to business.

"The reason I asked you here is that there's someone who wants to help me, to help us. She has been doing it for a few days now, and her help could be very important. You're going to be surprised when you see who it is, but I ask you to listen to what she has to say." He walked to the office and gestured for Pansy to come out. As she did, there was a gasp from the Slytherins; Harry could tell this was not something they were happy about, at least at first. Harry put his arm around Pansy's shoulders for a moment as a kind of silent endorsement, and they sat down next to each other, in front of the first years.

"But she's Malfoy's friend!" Augustina Delva almost shouted. "She's always with him, laughing and stuff."

"Think about it, Augustina," said Hedrick. "If she's a spy, she has to act like that, doesn't she?"

Harry nodded. "That's right, Hedrick. She came to me on Saturday, after Nott tried to kill me. She told me she wanted to help, that she was sick of Malfoy and wanted to do something better. I didn't know whether to believe her at first. She hadn't been very nice to us for five years." Pansy smiled, embarrassed, at his understatement. "But I've talked to her a lot since then, for a few hours over the past few days. I can see what kind of person she is, how she wants to be better than she was. I trust her. I believe her."

Pansy turned to face the first years. "I know it may be hard for you to believe me like Harry does. You've only seen the worst part of me, saying nice things about Malfoy, laughing with him, acting stupid. But when I'm with Harry, I can be who I want to be. He's been very kind. I've been very angry with myself for things I've done, for how I've been. I've cried on his shoulder, I mean actually, and he's been forgiving and understanding. He's been wonderful, and I'm grateful to him."

The first years looked entranced; they'd probably never seen anyone open up like this. Even Ron and Hermione looked impressed. "I want to keep pretending to be Malfoy's friend. I mean, I don't really want to, I hate him now. I've been so stupid to have been his friend before. But I want to keep pretending because I might find out something that could help Harry. He was almost killed on Saturday. I want to stop that from happening again. If I'd known Nott was a Death Eater, I could have told Harry, for example. I can find out things you can't, and I can understand small things that you might not, because I've been here so long. If you want, you can help me help him."

Harry spoke again. "You have to decide whether to help her. I have no authority over you, I can't tell you to do anything. You help me because you want to, and I'm very grateful for that. All I can tell you is that I trust her. You also need to understand that she's taking a risk, a big risk. You support me openly, all the

Slytherins know it. Pansy tells me that no one's bothering you for it any more, and they probably won't in the future. But what she's doing is very dangerous. If anybody finds out what she's doing... it's not impossible that she could be killed. It probably wouldn't happen, but you need to understand how important this is. Whether you help her or not, it's very important that you not say anything to anybody about this. She could be in real danger."

The Slytherins looked somber. "If we helped her," asked Helen, "what would we be doing?"

"Not that much, really," Harry answered. "Most of the time there wouldn't be so much you could do. It's mainly that you could tell her about things you noticed, things you heard, things that seem strange. She's in a better position to understand such things than me, or even you. It could help her find out about another Death Eater, help her protect me."

"All I want," Pansy said earnestly to the Slytherins, "is to keep him safe. What he's doing is so important. I'm so glad he doesn't have to worry about the Curse anymore, but he's still in danger."

There was silence, then Hedrick asked, "Is it okay if we talk about this for a minute?" Harry nodded, and led Pansy away to the other end of the classroom as the Slytherins huddled. "It's a little democracy they've got there," Harry said, smiling.

"Harry, thank you for everything you said, for everything you've done. Thank you for trusting me."

Harry smiled and shrugged a bit, not knowing how to respond. "Well, you opened up to me, that probably did it as much as anything else. By the way, tonight's formal demonstration of the new spell is closed, the whole school can't watch, and I'm only allowed to invite some friends and family. But I've asked Dumbledore to request that the prefects be there as well, so you can come and it won't look suspicious."

She smiled gratefully. "Thanks, I appreciate it." They talked for another minute. The Slytherins separated, indicating that they were done talking. Harry and Pansy walked over to them.

"We've decided that..." Looking at Pansy, Helen said, "We don't really know you, so we don't know that we can trust you, for ourselves. But we trust him. He risks his life for us, for all wizards and witches everywhere. And he trusts you." Turning to Harry, she continued, "So, if you trust her, then we trust her, because we trust you."

"Thank you," said Harry and Pansy at the same time. Some of the Slytherins giggled. "Now, I need to say this again, and I'm very serious," Harry said. They nodded attentively. "It's very important that you tell no one about this. No matter how close friends you are with them, no matter how much you trust them, you can't

tell them. They don't need to know, and it could put Pansy in danger. You shouldn't even talk about it among yourselves anywhere except your dormitories in case you're overheard. Don't use her name, don't say things that could help someone figure it out. Now, you might be thinking, of course, we know that, we're not stupid. I trust you, and I know you're smart. But I'm saying all this because of how important it is. I hope you understand that."

"We understand, sir," said David. "We won't let you down, or her." The others confirmed this with their eyes and nods.

"Okay," said Harry. "Now, I've asked Hermione to work out some way so that we can signal each other if we need to. Last year, with the D.A., we had fake Galleons that she had charmed to communicate meeting times. So, what have you come up with this time, Hermione?"

"Well, I decided to use Galleons again, for the same reason-it's not so suspicious to have one in your pocket. You just have to be sure not to try to spend it accidentally. Here, I'll give them to you now, and you can look at them while I explain how they work." She handed them out to everyone; each one had a small paper on it with the recipient's name. The first years looked impressed.

"First of all, each Galleon lights up in certain situations, and the area of the light shows which person it is. Imagine that each Galleon is like a slice of a pie with twelve pieces, or think of it like a clock. The first piece represents Harry, that is, from 12:00 to 1:00. From 1:00 to 6:00 are the boys, in alphabetical order. Then Pansy is from 6:00 to 7:00, and the girls are the rest. So, the right side is boys and the left side is girls, that's easy to remember.

"Now, you can signal each other using these. Here's one way of doing it: you just squeeze the center of the coin. I'll do it with Harry's." She squeezed, and on all the other coins, Harry's slice of the pie started blinking and vibrating. Everyone let out a gasp of appreciation, even Pansy. "So if you see that, you know Harry's signaling you. It's vibrating so you'll feel it in your pocket. My idea is that this is a distress or emergency signal; the blinking means that it's being sent to all the other coins. If it's just a general signal, nothing urgent, you do it differently. You find the right spot on the coin and you press the edge. Let's say Harry wants to meet Pansy. Harry presses the edge at Pansy's area." She did so, and Pansy's coin vibrated and lit up at Harry's area, not blinking. "So, if Pansy sees this, she knows Harry wants to talk to her. Also, Harry's and Pansy's can exchange basic information, like a time to meet. I didn't do that with the rest because you don't need it, and it's better to keep it simple. Any questions?"

Pansy and the Slytherins had dazed looks. "This is simple?" asked a girl named Sylvia.

"Now, this is how Harry and I feel all the time," Ron said, grinning.

"It'll be fine once you get used to it," Hermione said, ignoring Ron. "For you first years, it'll be mainly to signal Pansy that you want to talk to her. You don't need to signal Harry, since you can meet openly with him if you want. You don't really need to signal each other, of course. I would also advise you not to use it unless it's necessary, since whoever you signal can't look at it if there are people around."

"Is this what you do all that time you're in the library?" asked Pansy, amazed.

"No, but that's part of the reason I can do this," Hermione replied.

"Excuse me, but could you tell us this again, please?" asked a boy. Everyone laughed, and Hermione took him through it again. They practiced a bit, got another talk from Harry about security and what to do if they lost it, and they left. Pansy stayed back to talk to Harry, and to have Hermione explain how they could send each other times to meet with their coins. Pansy thanked Hermione warmly, said goodbye to Harry, and she left.

As Pansy walked away, Ron and Hermione walked up to Harry. "So, what do you think, Hermione?" asked Ron. "You're better at this sort of thing than I am."

"What sort of thing?" Harry asked.

"Ron was asking me at lunch whether I thought Pansy might be falling for you."

Harry rolled his eyes, but Ron looked serious. "What, you think it's impossible?" asked Ron.

"I think Ron has a reasonable point, Harry. Just the situation practically begs for it to happen. Think about it. You're the only person in her life with whom she can, as she said, be the person she wants to be. Being with you once a week is going to be the highlight of her week. You'll be happy to do it and enjoy it, but not like her; she'll look forward to it all week. It would almost be amazing if she didn't transfer some of that excitement onto you. And then there's you; look at how you're regarded around the school right now. Sure, that'll fade somewhat, but it's still there. And that you're a nice, kind, sympathetic person-and you do like her, I can tell. She can tell, too. Her eyes just lit up every time she looked at you. I'm not saying she's in love with you, not right now. But she's got a hard year ahead of her as long as she's under cover, and you're the only bright spot in it. It's not hard to see it coming."

Harry was frustrated. "What do you think I should do, then? Stop meeting her? Stop being nice to her? Stop liking her? I couldn't do that to her!"

"Calm down, Harry," Ron said. Unable to keep a small smile off his face, he added, "Focus on love."

"Very funny," Harry said, annoyed. Ron looked upset that his joke hadn't worked.

"Harry, I'm not criticizing you, and of course you shouldn't stop doing what you're doing," said Hermione earnestly. "I'm not sure that there's anything you can do. Maybe it's not nice of Ron and I to speculate on it, as if her feelings didn't matter. They do. But you should be aware of the possibility."

"She's aware of the possibility! She said on Sunday that it wasn't me that she was keen on, so much as what I represent. It seems at least possible that she could keep them separate."

"Well, I hope you're right, Harry, I really do. Maybe we shouldn't have brought it up, there's nothing you can do anyway. Let's go back to Gryffindor Tower, and we can help you go through the mail from the article."

They headed back to Gryffindor tower, and Harry calmed down. They spent an hour and a half reading through the mail, which was mostly supportive, and included two dozen requests for autographs. Hermione offered to go get him some parchment for that purpose.

"I'm not going to sit here signing autographs!" Harry almost shouted at her. She and Ron both looked at him, concerned. He exhaled. "I'm sorry... I don't know, maybe I'm concerned about what you said about Pansy. I hope it doesn't happen. I'd hate to cause her that kind of pain if it did."

"I know, Harry," Hermione said soothingly. She cast an accusatory glance at Ron, who didn't happen to be looking in her direction. Harry realized that she blamed him for bringing it up, since now it just worried Harry, and there was nothing he could do. "You should go on just as you have, be a friend to her. She needs one, badly. It's the only thing to do. Who knows what'll happen. If it happens, just help her out as best you can."

Harry reluctantly realized that she was right, and went back to reading the mail. He made Hermione happy by signing the autographs after all.

The Great Hall was cleared after dinner and the long tables moved, so there would be clear space in the middle of the room. Harry was up near the teachers' table talking to Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, Luna, Cho, and Justin. He was allowed to invite ten guests, and had chosen Justin to express his gratitude for Justin's support. Being a prefect, Ernie needed no invitation. The other five guests were Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Fred and George, and Remus Lupin, all of whom walked into the Hall together and approached Harry.

Harry got a very enthusiastic hug from Mrs. Weasley, and handshakes from the four men. Lupin said, "Thanks for your letter, Harry. I was going to write back,

but then this happened, and I was able just to come here. But I appreciated that you took the time during a crisis like that to write to me."

While Lupin was speaking, Harry noticed that the Slytherin prefects had come in, and Pansy was near enough to hear him talking to Lupin. He said to Lupin, "It was helpful to do it. So, how about the amusement park?"

Lupin smiled. "I have the whole day blocked out on my calendar."

Standing nearby, Fred said, "I have to say, I still feel a bit woozy."

"About what, Fred?" Harry wondered.

George answered, "Just before we came in here, Dumbledore showed us the images he showed the school yesterday morning. Looking at... Voldemort isn't my idea of a fun thing to do."

"Five points for Gryffindor, George," said Harry. Everyone nearby laughed.

"We couldn't believe it, Harry," agreed Fred. "The way you just took it to him, even though you'd been Cursed four nights in a row, as if you didn't have a care in the world. I know Hermione says you're a bit thick, but no one's that thick."

"I don't say that!" Hermione said, indignantly.

"That's right," Harry said. "Ron's the one who says I'm thick. Hermione's just the one who makes me look thick."

"Ah, how much we've forgotten, so quickly," lamented Fred.

"'Tis the nature of schooling," agreed George.

"I sincerely hope not, gentlemen, or I have not been doing my job," said Dumbledore, who was just walking by.

"Hello, Professor," said George. "It was great of you to come by the shop."

"Yes," added Fred, "We should get a photo of you and Harry, put up the title, 'Our two most prominent customers.'"

"Harry, they are ready for you," said Dumbledore, gesturing Harry to where he should stand. Harry said goodbye to his friends and walked to where Dumbledore had indicated.

As the senior Auror present, Kingsley Shacklebolt made the opening announcement. "Tonight we are here to observe a new spell, which as yet has no name, discovered by Professor Harry Potter, instructor of Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts. Professor Potter, each of the three Aurors will discharge the Cruciatus Curse at you two times. For the third round, you may request to attempt variations as you choose. Do you have any questions?"

"No," Harry responded.

"Very well, Professor. We will begin when you are ready."

Harry looked at the assembled faces. Most of the people he felt close to were in the room, watching him, silently cheering him on, proud of him. He smiled and took

it all in. They brought me through this, Harry thought. He felt their love, their caring. He basked in it, then turned.

"I'm ready."

* * * * *

POTTER DEMONSTRATES ANTI-CRUCIATUS SPELL AT HOGWARTS

Aurors Stunned At Effectiveness of As-Yet-Unnamed Spell

(Hogwarts) Hugo Brantell, Daily Prophet

A week of stunning developments in Hogwarts Professor Harry Potter's crusade to name He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named ended in spectacular fashion today, as Professor Potter successfully unveiled his new spell to veteran Aurors and representatives of the magical scientific community.

As reported here yesterday, the spell was developed extemporaneously by Professor Potter during the fourth night of an ordeal in which He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named invaded Professor Potter's dreams each night, insisted that Professor Potter cease his crusade, and used the dreaded Cruciatus Curse, with full effectiveness, on Professor Potter when each night he refused to do so.

Senior Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt led the team of Aurors who cast the Curse and measured the effectiveness of the spell used to block it. "His spell blocked the Curse with 100% effectiveness," said Shacklebolt. "If I hadn't just seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it."

The other Aurors were equally impressed. "His shield quite overwhelms the Curse," reported Auror Hubert Dawlish. "In addition, it fully surrounds him, so there is no place for the Curse to get through. Most new spells have required lengthy periods of refinement, but this one appears to be fully formed and perfect."

The three Aurors sent the Curse at Professor Potter twice each in the initial two rounds of testing. In the third round, in which the one presenting the spell may attempt variations on it, Professor Potter made requests which moved those close to him to fear for his safety. The first variation he requested was that the spell be done silently rather than on a countdown, so that he would have as little time as possible to prepare. Doing so, he blocked the spell.

The second variation Professor Potter requested was that he be blindfolded, then the Curse sent at him silently. His close friends, in attendance, strongly objected to this idea and attempted to dissuade him. He firmly overcame their objections, assuring them with complete confidence-which this reporter's empathic

abilities confirmed-that he would suffer no harm. The doubtful Aurors acceded to his request and blindfolded him thoroughly, then cast the spell silently after a wait of longer than a minute, so that Professor Potter would be less likely to anticipate the Curse purely by chance. To the Aurors' amazement, Professor Potter successfully blocked this Curse as well, his shield coming on while the Curse was en route.

Professor Potter then requested that three Curses be sent at him simultaneously, on a countdown, from three different directions. The Aurors, however, refused his request, and no amount of arguing on his part would move them. "If the Curse were something less dangerous, we would have accommodated him," said Shacklebolt, obviously in awe of the risks Professor Potter wished to take. "And frankly, the shield was so powerful that it might well have stopped all three. I would guess that it would have. But we didn't know for sure, and I didn't want to think about the effect of three simultaneous Curses on anyone."

A disappointed Professor Potter then chose as his third variation to be subjected to the Curse from behind, with no warning, the spell cast silently. This Curse was blocked by the shield as well.

How, Professor Potter was asked, could he have cast a defense against spells he could not have known were coming? "It was something I started to notice in the later dreams," he explained. "There was a different... feeling in the air just before V----- cast the Curse. I'm sorry, but I can't explain it any better than that. I also noticed it in yesterday's preliminary test, so I was confident that I would be able to anticipate the Curse. Obviously I was right. I'd much rather find this out now than find out the hard way against V----- or his Death Eaters." The professor's tone and manner, while inwardly and outwardly relaxed, conveyed his firm belief that such a confrontation must inevitably occur.

As reported yesterday, a unique feature of this spell is that it is to be cast while the caster is strongly focusing on the emotion of love, and that the shield is to be formed of the energy of love. The scientific community has asserted that there is no scientifically verifiable such thing as 'the energy of love,' but Professor Potter insists, with unshakable certainty, that that is what he summoned, and that is what it is.

Unfortunately, part of what makes the spell so remarkable-that it can stop the Cruciatus Curse-also inhibits testing and research; the price of failing to stop a spell is so high that few will be willing to experiment. Professor Potter has offered to be a subject for whatever experiments the scientific community may find desirable; the community is now weighing his offer.

Meanwhile. Professor Potter has accepted Mr. Shacklebolt's invitation to visit the Ministry this weekend to give a presentation on his spell to the full complement of Aurors. "I'd say that people will want to come in on their day off to hear what he has to say," said Shacklebolt confidently.
(Related story on page 9.)

Chapter 14

Star of the Match

POTTER'S CAMPAIGN TO USE DARK LORD'S NAME SLOWLY GATHERS SUPPORT

More and More People Willing To Say the Dreaded Name, V-----

(London) Hugo Brantell, Daily Prophet

Seven weeks after Hogwarts Professor Harry Potter faced down He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named (hereafter referred to as V-----) in a series of nighttime mental attacks, more and more people say they are beginning to see-and act on-Professor Potter's simple question: How can we fight him if we're too afraid to even say his name?

An unscientific survey of attitudes in the wizarding world suggests that support for Professor Potter's point of view is growing. People are still afraid, it seems, but more are fighting their fears and saying the name, or sympathize, and hope to reach a point where they can say it in the future. Many still resist the notion, of course, but what support does exist is remarkable considering what attitudes were two months ago.

Unsurprisingly, Hogwarts has become the center of this support. Most Hogwarts students now not only say the name, but do it unselfconsciously, with little or no fear. Typical of students' attitudes is a first year boy who said, "Professor Potter taught us that it's just a name, so there's no reason to be scared. I mean, I'm still scared of V-----, just not his name." A third year girl agreed, saying, "Once you get used to saying his name, it's not so bad. You realize it's just a word. It would be like not saying the word 'fire' because you're afraid of fire."

Hogwarts headmaster Albus Dumbledore, widely reputed to be the only living wizard feared by V-----, was Professor Potter's inspiration for his crusade, and strongly supports it. "I have been saying his name, and encouraging others to do so, for more than a decade, with very limited results. Professor Potter, however, has

managed to do much more in a short time. I am very proud of what he has accomplished, and will continue to do my utmost to support him."

Among those who have become willing to say the name, Professor Potter's struggle with V----- is widely cited as their inspiration to do so. Readers will recall that in early September, in response to Professor Potter's crusade, V----- invaded Professor Potter's mind at night, aided by a highly unusual telepathic link created by the curse scar, and subjected Professor Potter to the Cruciatus Curse for four nights in a row, until Professor Potter defeated V-----'s intentions by developing a shield to block the Curse. Professor Potter's willingness to face the Curse, and V-----, undefended for four nights while refusing to stop saying the name was widely considered one of the greatest acts of personal bravery known to have occurred in recent years.

"He did it for us," said Tillie Malten, a middle-aged London witch. "He suffered that so we could say V-----'s name. He led by example. The only way we can honor what he's done is to say the name ourselves."

In agreement was Amos Diggory, whose son Cedric was the first killed by V----- upon his return from near-death. "Cedric always liked and respected Harry, and I'm sure he would support what Harry is doing. All I know is, V----- will kill you whether you say his name or not, so why not say it?"

Most people who are not in agreement with Professor Potter do not necessarily oppose what he is doing, but rather, think it to be tempting fate and imprudent. "With respect to Harry, he wasn't around when You-Know-Who was strong before, killing people right and left. He has no personal experience of the terror that caused. Those of us who do, feel we have good reason not to say the name," says Tibor Lowton, a Hogsmeade retiree. What, he was asked, of Professor Potter's argument that one cannot fight V----- if one cannot say his name? "Honestly, I can't speak to that. I see the point, I understand he has to be fought. I just don't think I can say the name, and don't blame anyone who can't."

The Ministry of Magic is not taking an official position on this matter. "How people wish to refer to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is a matter for people to decide individually, and the Ministry should not attempt to dictate such things, one way or the other," said an unnamed Ministry spokesperson in a statement. Sources inside the Ministry say the Ministry leadership is edging cautiously in Professor Potter's direction, but is unwilling to take a clear stand as yet for fear of possible political backlash. "[The Ministry leadership] have licked their finger and stuck it in the air, and now they're waiting for some wind," said a disgusted Ministry source who supports Professor Potter. The source then shrugged resignedly. "But then, since when were bureaucrats ever known for bravery? Thank goodness we have Harry."

Where he leads, people will eventually follow, and the bureaucrats will be dragged along."

* * * * *

The next several weeks were among the most gratifying Harry had ever spent at Hogwarts. He enjoyed his teaching duties; as others had told him would happen, the students' awe had worn off, but he knew he had their complete respect and admiration, and they took everything he said very seriously. Not only did no one skive off again, but he was forced to send two obviously sick students, who had attended his class anyway, to Madam Pomfrey. The students considered their time with him the high point of their week.

As Hermione had predicted, so did Pansy Parkinson. Harry continued to meet with her every week, occasionally twice. She had observed Malfoy's schedule and found times during which her absence would not arouse suspicion, and they usually met during those times. He found his affection for her becoming close to what he felt for his other friends, but her obvious enthusiasm for meeting him and affection for him caused him to remember what Ron and Hermione had said about the possibility of her falling in love with him. He still didn't think it would happen, largely because a part of him still refused to acknowledge that he was worthy of someone falling in love with him, but it concerned him anyway.

Harry's presentation to the Aurors had gone well; they were spellbound by his talk, and they pelted him with questions for two hours after he finished. They were very eager to be able to learn the spell, and he told them as much as he could. With Dumbledore's assistance, Harry showed them all five of the dreams, so they would better understand what had happened, and talked about his thoughts and emotional state between each one. They were gratified that he wanted to become one of them, and expressed confidence that he would manage it. In the weeks since, he had kept in communication with some of them. Even so, the only person so far who had learned the spell was Dumbledore, who learned it quickly enough to demonstrate it to the Aurors along with Harry.

Harry had made an unusual request of Dumbledore; with studying Occlumency now not so urgent, and with Dumbledore confident that his skill was sufficient to deal with any problems, he asked for private lessons of a different sort. He explained that he wanted to learn the sort of spells that Aurors knew, the sort that he had seen Dumbledore use against Voldemort. "I know I'm going to be facing him again," Harry had said, "and I want to be able to deal with him, and his Death Eaters. I think I can learn whatever you can teach me." Dumbledore agreed, and allowed Ron, Ginny,

and Hermione to join as well, partly so Harry would have someone to partner with. Only Hermione, however, was able to keep up with Harry learning the new spells. Ginny joked that this group should truly be called 'Dumbledore's Army.'

As Dumbledore had predicted, after Harry's ordeal with Voldemort was over, Fawkes spent less time with Harry, perhaps a third of each day or less. Unlike Dumbledore, who was in his office every day, Harry moved around the school a lot, so it was difficult for Fawkes to be with him too much without constantly staying on Harry's shoulder as he had while the dreams persisted. Fawkes showed up most often as Harry was going to sleep or waking up, studying in the common room, and while Harry taught.

He spent much of his time with Ron and Hermione, as usual, but they were all busy. Harry had to work hard to keep up with his studies, as he had teaching and Quidditch practice responsibilities. Ron spent hours in the common room and dormitory working out Quidditch strategies, and watched a lot of Omni-view to get ideas. Their first match was against Slytherin, and while Harry had stopped thinking of the whole of Slytherin house as an enemy, he was still highly motivated to beat Malfoy, as was Ron. Hermione was working hard to keep up with ten classes, and she mentioned meeting Ernie a few times, but Harry didn't pay much attention; he assumed they were still working out how to re-take the Astronomy O.W.L. exam.

Harry was relaxing in the staff room on a Thursday afternoon in the last week of October when a familiar golden dog jumped onto his lap and pawed at him. Harry got up and followed it to Dumbledore's office.

"Yes, Harry, thank you for coming," said Dumbledore. "I wished to confirm your plans this weekend. Will you be going into Hogsmeade both days?"

"Yes, sir, I think so. Why?"

"I am concerned about security. It is not inconceivable that Voldemort may order Death Eaters to mount an attack on Hogsmeade. They know they cannot touch the school itself, so Hogsmeade full of students is the next logical target."

"Is that something they're really going to do? What can they accomplish?"

"The point of the attack would be terror, Harry. If the school were less secure they would have attacked it already. Your defeat of Voldemort was as damaging to him as it was uplifting to the wizarding community, and he will want an opportunity to strike back. We have no specific intelligence which points to such an attack; it is all speculation. We considered canceling Hogsmeade weekend, but we realized that there could then be no Hogsmeade weekends at all until Voldemort is defeated, and we are not willing to pay such a price."

"Of course not, sir. We have to be careful, but do what we would otherwise do."

"Does that mean, Harry, that you have changed your mind about the idea of a romantic attachment?"

Harry felt like rolling his eyes, but didn't feel it was right to do that with Dumbledore. "A lot of people have mentioned this to me, but only you and Hermione have made that particular argument. It's annoying, because it's true."

"And?" Dumbledore prompted him.

Harry sighed. "For now, I just avoid the question, because there's nobody I'm especially interested in at the moment. If I fall in love, I'll have to deal with it. It's just hard to see why I should go out of my way to find someone now. And I know there are plenty of girls who'd go out with me, but that just seems like tempting fate."

"I don't mean to intrude, of course, Harry--"

"Of course you're not intruding, sir. There's nothing I wouldn't talk to you about."

"Thank you, Harry, I appreciate that."

Harry thought a moment. "Sir, there's something I've been meaning to mention to you, but never have." He described the situation with Pansy Parkinson, and Hermione's warning from last month. "Is there anything I can do?"

Dumbledore considered. "Do you think it impossible that you might return her affection in the same way, if that turned out to be the case?"

"No, she's very nice, and I feel a strong attachment to her, but in a similar way that I do with Hermione and Ginny. My stomach doesn't do backflips like it did with Cho."

Dumbledore smiled. "Such symptoms are not the only way we know if we are attracted to someone. It can come upon you suddenly. But you would not rule her out as a possibility because of her past association with Mr. Malfoy?"

Harry was surprised that he would ask. "Of course not, sir."

"Then, I would say you could not know how you might feel. But even if you were sure you would not fall in love with her, I would say that you should do nothing differently than what you are doing. You are simply being yourself, and you cannot fault yourself for that. You say she knows this risk, so it is up to her now. She may fall in love with you and find her heart broken. But it would not be your fault; it is a part of life. There is only so much you can do to protect those you care about from pain. They have their own lives to live, their own choices to make. All you can do is be the best person you can be."

"I understand, sir." Harry wasn't happy about it, but he understood. "Anyway, I'll probably go to the Three Broomsticks after the Quidditch is over, then do some errands on Sunday. I'll be with Ron, Hermione, and Neville."

"I see that Neville is being slowly integrated into your group."

Harry nodded. "He's a really nice person, he's just always been so shy. It was just starting last year when he got more... approachable, I guess. Anyway, if something does happen, it'll be good to have him around."

"Speaking of which, Harry... if something does happen, and the village should fall under attack, I trust you and your friends will immediately head back to the castle?"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Sir, it's not like you to make such an obvious joke."

"But I wish you to be safe and unhurt, Harry. Just as you wish Pansy to be safe and unhurt, emotionally. But you have no choice but to follow the dictates of your heart, to help those who need it. Neither does she. You know the risks; so does she. I could confine you to Hogwarts to ensure your safety. You could deliberately be with Pansy someone other than who you are."

Harry reluctantly nodded. "Of course you're right, sir."

"Again, Harry, we have no particular reason to think that anything will happen, but there will be a higher-than-usual level of security in Hogsmeade."

"Thank you, sir. We'll keep our eyes open." Harry said goodbye and left.

Harry had a meeting with Pansy later that afternoon, and in a fit of openness, decided to relate what he'd talked about with Dumbledore. "Really, I'm not even sure why I'm telling you this," he finished. "I think it just makes me look stupid, or egotistical, like, wow, I'm the great Harry Potter, how could any girl possibly resist-"

Pansy cut him off with a gesture, and with laughter. "I'm sorry, Harry, I'm not laughing at you, like you're stupid... when you use the word 'egotistical,' I couldn't help but think that your ego is very small, especially compared with your accomplishments. You may be the least egotistical person I know. I would never think that."

She paused for a moment before continuing. "It was good of you to tell me that. I care about you and I want to know if something's bothering you, especially if it has to do with me." She looked at him earnestly. "Look, it could happen. Hermione's right, the situation would make it easy. The only part of my world that I really like is you. But Dumbledore's also right. I chose to do this, I accepted whatever risks there were. I wasn't thinking of the risk that I would fall in love with you, but the emotional problem of having no one to talk to but you."

"It's typically sweet of you to be concerned," she continued, smiling. "And I can't say I really know what it's like to be in love, so it's hard for me to say that it could never happen. All I know is that you don't make my heart flutter, or my stomach do backflips, like you said to Dumbledore. You make me happy, probably unnaturally so because of my situation. You make me feel good about myself. Who

knows, maybe that's the kind of thing that leads to being in love. How would I know? I know you'd feel horrible if I got my heart broken. You can't do much else."

She thought for another minute; Harry didn't say anything, since he could tell she had more to say. She took a deep breath. "Okay, you're always telling me personal stuff, so I am now. If I've ever thought about being with you, being in love with you, one thing has always squelched the idea. I feel like I wouldn't deserve you, like my past taints me. What I've been, what I've done, is so awful that..." She stopped for a moment to compose herself. "You're not perfect, Harry, but you have a very good heart. You'd never deliberately hurt anyone. Not even Malfoy if you have a choice. I like to think I have a good heart now, but before I didn't. You deserve someone like yourself." Her face reflected this self-image.

Harry's heart went out to her. "Pansy, that's ridiculous. You're different now. When I look at you I don't see that."

"I know that, Harry. That's one reason I love being with you. You see me as who I am, or who I want to be. But I'm talking about how I see myself, and that's hard for you to understand. Maybe it's easier for you to be forgiving of me than for me to be forgiving of myself. I don't know. Part of me understands that it's not right, that if I'm a good person now I'm as 'deserving' as anyone else. But the part that sees myself as undeserving is stronger. I'm not even sure I know why, I just know that it does." She saw the sorrow in his eyes, and added, "I know you don't know what to say. I doubt Hermione or Ginny ever had cause to spill their guts to you like this." He shook his head; she nodded. "So you must not know what to think."

"I know that I'd never hold your past against you like that, and I would never think you're not deserving of me. I have so much respect for you, Pansy... it's like you're trying to climb a difficult mountain. I guess then I would be a lifeline, but you have to do the hard part yourself. You have a lot to be proud of, and I'm definitely proud of you."

Her eyes shone. "Thank you, Harry. Maybe I just need to hear that once in a while. I don't think I can change my self-image overnight, but what you said helps... Harry... have you ever felt undeserving?"

That was an easy question for Harry. "Sure, of course. I'm the Boy Who Lived, remember? All my life in the wizarding world, most people have treated me as if I'm part of the royal family or something, were extra nice to me, were honored to meet me, whatever. And what had I done? Survive a curse when I was one year old because of my mother's sacrifice? Did I deserve all that? Of course not. For a long time, I felt undeserving every time someone was nice to me because I was Harry Potter. Like I was a phony or something... 'no, that's not me, you must be thinking of someone

else, I'm just a normal person.' And I've told you how my aunt and uncle treated me, so I probably felt undeserving from that, too."

She nodded. "At least you got to feel undeserving despite who you really were. I feel undeserving because of who I really was. But I suppose it feels the same way in the end. Maybe that's why I'm doing this, I have to do something to make myself feel deserving... not just of you, but anyone who's a good person." She sighed. "I'm sorry, a lot of this is like what I've said before. And I knew it was going to take some time. I just hadn't put it in terms like 'I don't deserve Harry Potter' before. It's like you're my counselor."

He shook his head ruefully. "No, it's more like I'm your sympathetic ear. A counselor actually offers insight and helpful advice. I don't do much of that. I just listen."

"Well, you do a very good job of it."

"You know," said Harry, "what I would advise you to do, is go talk to Professor Dumbledore. He listens, and has good advice. I've always felt better after I've talked to him, about anything. I mean, I don't want you not to talk to me... I feel good that you're comfortable doing it. But it's hard for me to know what to say to help you. I'm sure he would."

"But you have a relationship with him," Pansy pointed out. "I barely know him. How can I just go to his office and start telling him stuff like this?"

Harry gave her a serious look. "Because I'm telling you, you can. I wouldn't suggest this unless I was certain that you'd feel better for doing it. It doesn't matter if he doesn't know you that well. He would listen to anyone who needed to talk to him. But he'd be sympathetic to you anyway; he knows you're taking risks to help me, he knows how isolated you are. Trust me, he'd be very helpful."

"Well, then he comes highly recommended. Maybe I will. Thank you. Oh, by the way, there was something I wanted to tell you. Not that important, but it's strange. You play Slytherin on Saturday, right? Well, Malfoy's been acting really strange about that. Talking about how he's going to beat you. Well, he always says stuff like that, never manages it, but it sounds different this time. He has this attitude like he's celebrating in advance, like it's a sure thing. When I ask him how he's so sure, he acts like 'I've got a secret and if you're nice enough to me I might tell you what it is.' Pretty childish for a sixteen-year-old, really. But I thought you ought to know that. Whatever it is, it could even be dangerous to you. Keep an eye on him."

"Problem is, in Quidditch, I have to keep both eyes on the Snitch, or else we're going to lose. Don't worry, he's not going to do anything that could injure me in front of three hundred people. He's not that far gone."

"He would if he thought he could get away with it, I'm sure of that."

"Well, that's true," Harry admitted. "And his opinion of what he could get away with might be different from reality. Well, I have to keep an eye on him anyway, know where he is just in case I have to dive for the Snitch. I'll keep my eyes open for anything unusual." Pansy nodded, but didn't look very reassured.

"Harry!" He heard Hermione's voice from the classroom; he and Pansy walked out to meet her. "Hi, Pansy," said Hermione warmly.

"Is it that obvious?" Pansy asked in dismay. Harry and Hermione exchanged puzzled looks.

"What?" asked Hermione.

Now Pansy looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry, I thought... something was bothering me and I told Harry about it, and I was all upset. You seemed like you were being nice to me, and I thought maybe you noticed."

"I'm sorry, Pansy... no, I didn't, I just... I know how hard what you're doing is, and I really appreciate that you're doing it. I hadn't thought about it."

Pansy smiled, embarrassed. "Thank you, Hermione. That kind of thing is what I need to hear right now."

Hermione nodded sympathetically and looked around the room. "I have to show you something, let's go back into the office." They followed her back in.

"This is something I did mostly with you in mind, actually," she said, looking at Pansy. "We have the Marauder's Map, and you could really use something like it. So this has been a little project I've been working on."

Pansy was amazed. "How do you find time for projects when you have ten classes?" Harry was impressed as well.

Hermione shrugged, and took out what looked like an advertising flyer. "This is, obviously, a fold-out flyer for cosmetics. I chose it partly because it wouldn't be conspicuous, and it's the kind of thing Malfoy would think nothing of if he found. Also, when you fold it out, it has a decent surface area." She demonstrated. "Now, Harry, please don't say anything until I tell you otherwise. Pansy, after I wave my wand, please say the word 'open,' and tap the map with your wand, okay?" Pansy looked confused, but nodded. Hermione waved her wand, and Pansy said the word.

Immediately the flyer changed into a map of Hogwarts, a very detailed one. Pansy and Harry gasped in appreciation. Pleased at their reactions, Hermione continued. "Obviously it's based on the Marauder's Map; I've made some modifications that should be helpful. One of them, as you see, is to color-code what type of person it is. Red is Gryffindor, green is Slytherin, yellow is Hufflepuff, blue is Ravenclaw, and black is for teachers and staff. So if anybody's out of place from where they should be, it'll be obvious by their color."

Hermione went on to explain more features: one could zoom in on each house's common room and dormitories so the names would be easier to read, any person's name could be changed to bright gold so as to highlight them, and a person's recent movements could be viewed in a speeded-up fashion. She decided to use Harry to demonstrate.

"Pansy, could you say, 'Harry Potter, four hours'?"

Pansy looked uncertain. "Sure, but why not you?"

"When I asked you to say the word that opened the map, I charmed your voice to it. It will respond only to your voice now, so there's no chance that anyone could use it if they found it. If anyone other than you tries to touch their wand to it, nothing will happen."

Pansy shook her head in wonder. "Harry Potter, four hours," she said. Suddenly the map was clear, except for Harry's dot and name. Hermione said, "Okay, he was in the staff room four hours ago, then he talked to Dumbledore, then went to the bathroom... sorry, Harry..." Harry rolled his eyes as Pansy giggled. "Then to our Care of Magical Creatures class, then to Gryffindor Tower, then here. You can adjust the speed at which it plays back, but this is a pretty good one."

"Now, here's the best feature, the one that was hardest to do. The map will make a person's name blink if they've been anywhere unusual in the past twenty-four hours. This doesn't work now; the map has to accumulate enough information to know where people usually go. After a week, it should have enough information to start doing that. This could obviously be very useful. Oh, and I made Malfoy's color purple, since I assume he's the one you'll be looking out for, mostly. That's pretty much everything. Obviously you should only use it someplace really private, like a bathroom stall, or your bed."

Pansy looked at Hermione in gratitude and confusion. "You did all this just for me?"

"Well, I've made copies for each of us, too; once you've made one, the others are much easier. Also, it wasn't only me; Ernie helped me with a few things. And no, Harry, he doesn't know who it's for. I told him it was because we were concerned about another Death Eater, which is true, if a bit indirect. But yes, Pansy, it was mainly for you."

"Why?" asked Pansy. "This must have taken hours of effort."

"Pansy, you're risking your life to help keep Harry safe. As far as I'm concerned, that's a very worthwhile cause. Of course, I'm going to do everything I can to help you. I don't want anything to happen to you."

Pansy still looked stunned. "I don't know what to say, Hermione. Thank you. This will be extremely helpful." Now Harry thought that she might be about to cry. "I'm sorry, it's just... I'm not used to people doing nice things for me like that."

"It's all right, Pansy. You deserve it," Hermione assured her.

Pansy chuckled. "Funny that you should say that, considering what we were just talking about." To Harry's surprise, Pansy related the main points of their conversation. "And it's nice of you to worry that I'd fall in love with him," she added, now smiling at Hermione's obvious embarrassment.

"Well, I can just see how it could happen. He is pretty lovable." From Hermione's grin, Harry could tell that she meant what she said, but also enjoyed the embarrassment she knew it would cause Harry.

"Can I ask you something kind of personal, Hermione?" Pansy asked. Hermione nodded. "How is it that you've never fallen in love with him? I mean, you're always around each other, and half the school thinks you're an item anyway, or has thought so."

"Excuse me, I'm just going to sit under the Invisibility Cloak and pretend I'm not here," said Harry, visibly blushing.

"Oh, be quiet, Harry," said Hermione, smiling. She turned back to Pansy. "He is cute when he's embarrassed, isn't he?" They both chuckled. "It's a good question. I have thought about it, of course, but I'm not sure why. The obvious answer is that I cherish him too much as a friend to risk that with the complications of a relationship. But that probably wouldn't stop me if I were in love with him. Maybe I just got so used to him as a friend, from a young age, that I put him in this category of being a friend. So, I could speculate for hours, and I'm sure Harry would love that. But in the end, I'm not sure that I know. Sorry I can't answer any better than that." The thought occurred to Harry that from his side of the situation, he wouldn't have wanted to be in love with or married to someone with Hermione's exact personality, given how she so often tried to tell he and Ron what to do. He could overlook it in a friend, but he wasn't sure he wanted to find out what it would be like to have a girlfriend like that. He wasn't sure, but he assumed that was part of the reason he had never thought of her in a romantic way.

"No, I can understand that," Pansy said. "It makes sense. I'm not sure anybody really understands how that works. I wish there was some control I could set on the setting of 'he's just a friend,' but I guess I'll just have to take my chances." She smiled at Harry.

He shook his head and said, "Well, I guess I'm happy enough that you're comfortable teasing me to not get annoyed. But I don't know how much more of this I can take. Ron would have run screaming from the room by now."

Pansy chuckled; Hermione laughed out loud. "Yes, he would've," Hermione agreed. "Not very expressive, our Ron. But we love him anyway."

"Well, I should go," said Pansy. "Thank you again, Hermione. This was really nice. See you later." She put the new map into her robes and left the office.

Harry looked at Hermione. "Bet you really enjoyed that," he said grumpily.

"Well, of course. But it's also nice for Pansy and I to have a laugh together at your expense. It helps us get closer."

"Glad I could help. By the way, I really am impressed with what you did with that map. It's great. I can see why she was so happy."

"Thank you, Harry. I must admit, I am proud of it. But like I said, Ernie helped, and also I had lots of help getting started from Remus." To Harry's raised eyebrows, she continued, "I had the idea way back near the beginning of the year. You told me that Pansy said she wished the Marauder's Map could tell where a person had been, and that gave me an idea. So I spent a while talking to Remus the night of your shield's demonstration, and he told me about the basics of how it worked, and how to get started. He saved me hours of work. The hardest thing was the modifications I made. The Marauder's Map was only made with rule-breaking in mind, not spycraft. But I'm happy with how it came out."

"You should be, it's really good," said Harry. "Hmmm... I was going to say, let's get back to Gryffindor Tower, but it's not too far from dinnertime. We might as well wait and go straight there. I want to finish eating quickly, since tonight's our last Quidditch practice before the match."

She nodded. "So, have the first years been able to do anything to help Pansy much?"

"Apparently not. She thinks there's just been nothing to see. But she said she's getting to know them better. Sometimes she talks to them in their common rooms, and they're comfortable with her now. So, that's good."

"Harry... don't you think Ron is getting too intense about the Quidditch? I'm getting kind of concerned about him."

"This happens with every Quidditch captain," Harry assured her. "Especially at first, they're really intense like this. Wood was always that way, of course, but I think Ron'll be okay. I think he'll relax a bit after we beat Slytherin. And we will, we've never lost to them; they don't pick players for their skill." He decided not to relate what Pansy had said, because he feared Hermione would worry and continually badger him to be careful.

"Harry! You in here?" Ron shouted from the classroom. Harry shouted back, and Ron joined them. "What's up?" asked Ron.

"It seems that your focus on Quidditch is a bit much, Ron," said Harry. Hermione gave him a dirty look.

"Yes, she's mentioned that to me too," Ron answered, as if Hermione weren't there. "I just try to ignore her."

Before Hermione could respond, Harry countered, "Yeah, but are you sure you aren't ignoring her because you're too focused on Quidditch?"

Rolling her eyes, Hermione said, "All right, that's enough. I'm not going to give you your presents if you're not nice to me."

Ron blinked. "What presents?"

"These are good, Ron. You're going to want to be nice to her," Harry advised.

"Absolutely right, Harry," agreed Hermione. She proceeded to take out Harry and Ron's maps and demonstrate them. Ron was suitably impressed. "Wow, you did this all yourself?"

"Like I told Harry, Remus helped at the beginning, and Ernie at the end."

"How did Ernie get involved?" wondered Ron.

"Well, he's pretty good at Charms, and somehow it just came up in conversation at the library. He thinks it was just for us, and I made sure he knew not to tell anyone. Ron, here's yours. As you're so focused on Quidditch these days, yours was made from an order form from Quality Quidditch Supplies. Harry, I made yours from Fred and George's catalog. Not that we're going to get into much trouble if we get caught, but best just to keep it low profile. I'll give Ginny hers later."

"Thanks, Hermione. It'll be really good for us to each have our own copy of this. Kind of makes the Marauder's Map obsolete, though, doesn't it?"

"Remus mentioned that himself. He didn't mind, though. I'm sure we could find someone who could use it."

"I was going to say, give it to Ernie, as a thank-you for helping you, but then I realized that he'd never be the type to use it anyway," Harry said.

"No, he'd be the type to confiscate it," Ron agreed. "Perfect Head Boy material. You two'll get along great next year, Hermione."

"What do you mean?" demanded Hermione, looking like she did in fact know what he meant.

"Well, Hermione," said Harry, trying to divert her attention from Ron, "I think most people assume that you and he will be Head Boy and Girl next year. It does seem pretty likely, if you think about it."

"You know, good grades, responsible, orderly," Ron agreed.

"It doesn't bother you to think you might not get it?" asked Hermione.

Ron shook his head. "I'm not even the prefect type, really. I only got it because they didn't want to give it to Harry because of all the other stuff he had going on, with Voldemort having come back and everything."

Harry wondered why Ron thought that. It was true, but he had never said it to Ron. "Well, if you think about it, I'm not the prefect type either. I'm not a great student, and I don't care much about people breaking the rules."

"Harry, it's not just about that," pointed out Hermione. "It's about having leadership qualities, and you can't possibly deny that you have that. You've taken a leadership role in the whole wizarding community, for heaven's sake. I'm sure they'd make you Head Boy next year if it weren't for the fact that you'll be the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. They still may, for all I know."

"Wait a minute, who says I'm going to be the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher next year? I wasn't aware that that was set in stone or anything."

Ron and Hermione exchanged a look, annoyed at Harry's obtuseness. "Harry, you have the job," Ron pointed out. "What do you think they're going to do, fire you?"

Harry tilted his head. "I hadn't thought of it like that. I'm so used to the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher lasting only one year, I hadn't even thought beyond this year. I guess I see what you mean, though. If I survive the year. I could still end up on your Hall of Misfortune, Ron."

Ron sighed. "I knew that was going to come up sooner or later. Harry, the job is yours for as long as you want it. They don't fire teachers, certainly not ones that have your status. Just based on what you've done this year, you could keep the job for life. I know you want to be an Auror, so you'll probably give up this job after next year. We're just saying, this is your job if you want to keep it, just like Charms is Flitwick's job. Dumbledore or the school won't see you two any differently. But, yes, they probably won't make you Head Boy while you're a teacher. It would be too weird."

"Ron... remember when we looked into the Mirror of Erised?"

Ron nodded. "I know what you're going to say. I saw myself as Quidditch captain with the Quidditch Cup, and as Head Boy. I've done two of those now. But that was when I was eleven. I've done stuff now. Okay, more properly, I've helped you do stuff. But that's not important to me anymore. I don't feel like I need to outshine my brothers. I mean, Bill and Charlie are so much older that they seem more like uncles than brothers, Fred and George aren't the types I'd feel competitive with, and Percy showed that being Head Boy is no guarantee you won't be an overambitious, arrogant, unprincipled jerk. I don't feel like I have anything to prove to my brothers."

"That's good, Ron," said Hermione. "That's a good attitude. By the way, what's the latest with Percy? I never did ask during the summer."

"I try not to think about it too much," said Ron. "Doesn't involve me, really. But it's not much better. He's showing signs of moving back in our direction, but with the exception of Mum, none of us are sure we really want him back. After all, he turned his back on his family because he thought it would be good for his career advancement. That says what kind of person he is. If he comes back now, it'll really look like it's because the Ministry is cooperating with Dumbledore now, and not because he regrets what he did. I'd have to hear a pretty serious apology before I'd really think about considering him a family member."

Nobody answered for a moment. Then Harry said, "That sounds harsh and unforgiving, but I really see what you mean. What he did was a deliberate betrayal. I didn't even want to forgive Marietta Edgecombe, and Percy is your brother."

"Not to mention what he said about you in that letter. I haven't forgotten that, either." Harry nodded to let Ron know that he appreciated Ron's indignation on his behalf.

"Are your parents having arguments about it, Ron?" asked Hermione.

"If they are, they're keeping them quiet. I think my Dad feels strongly enough about it to really argue with her. Normally she's the one who feels strongly, and he lets her have her way because it's easier than fighting. But I suspect that Mum knows now isn't a good time to really press Dad about it. Probably she's hoping for a different situation, but I'm not sure what that would be."

"It's so sad," Hermione said. "I know Percy did something terrible, but it's really bad when families are split up." Neither Harry nor Ron had anything to say to that.

"Let's go get some dinner," Harry suggested. "It's time now, and we want to get to that practice. I'm starting to feel real focused on Quidditch."

Ron grinned and Hermione shook her head as they headed out of the classroom and to the Great Hall.

Saturday morning, the day before Halloween, was a sunny and surprisingly warm day, no doubt one of the last mild days of the year. Perfect for Quidditch, Harry thought as he looked out the windows of the Great Hall at the blue sky.

As Harry glanced over at Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherin team, he couldn't help but think that normally, Malfoy would have come over and tried to taunt them. The reason he hadn't had to be that Harry was a teacher now. Malfoy, having already served twenty hours of detention at Harry's orders, was obviously in no mood to give Harry any further opportunities, and he had to wonder whether harassing any

of Harry's teammates would be such an opportunity. Harry focused on bucking up Dennis Creevey, who was very nervous. Harry told Dennis how nervous he was before his first match, and assured him it was normal.

"After the match, we're staying to watch the Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff match, right?" asked Dennis.

"Yes, Dennis. There are seats reserved for us to watch after we play."

"Why are both games being played on the same day, anyway?" asked Hermione, who was sitting near the team.

"It's for security reasons," explained Harry. "The stands might make for a good target, so they have extra security, and they want to play both matches at once because it's more efficient, they don't have to arrange all the extra security twice."

"But nobody's really going to attack, are they?" asked a slightly alarmed Dennis.

"No, almost certainly not, Dennis," Harry assured him. "This is just to be really careful. Now, you should have more breakfast."

Dennis halfheartedly took another bite of his food, but Harry recognized this form of pre-match jitters, and decided to leave Dennis alone. He looked around the Hall again and saw a familiar figure approach.

"Tonks!" He got to his feet and greeted her. "What are you doing here?"

She put a hand on his shoulder. "Well, I heard the post of girlfriend was still open. Thought I'd see how you felt about older women." Everyone nearby laughed, and she smiled at Harry's embarrassment.

"Not you, too," he said, reluctantly smiling. "Everyone, this is... Tonks, she only goes by the one name. She's an Auror. And I doubt she's that much older than me."

Her eyes lit up playfully. "Ooh, thank you, Harry. Sounds like I might have a shot."

He decided to tease her back. "Well, you are quite attractive... most of the time." He could tell that his teammates were surprised that he would say that. She knew what he was referring to, and played along. "What, you mean you don't like this one?" she pouted, changing her nose to look more like a pig snout. The Gryffindors who had never met her gasped; Tonks explained her unusual ability as she ran through a few hair and nose changes. "I could actually make myself more attractive, but I'm afraid to. People would like it, and then be disappointed when I went back to my real face."

"So what are you doing here, really, Tonks?" Harry asked.

"Harry, haven't these girls been teaching you anything? When a woman puts down her appearance, you're supposed to compliment her. You should have said, 'Tonks, you couldn't make yourself any more attractive than you already are.'"

"Tonks, you couldn't make yourself any more attractive than you already are," Harry said obligingly.

"Okay, that's a start, next time you just have to say it like you mean it," she grinned. "To answer your question, I'm part of the security today. A few other Aurors and I will be patrolling the edges of the pitch on our brooms. I'm sure we'll also sneak a look at the game from time to time, so do well, Harry."

"I always try," he assured her.

"Okay, everyone, time to go," announced Ron. The Gryffindor team got up, to applause from the rest of the table, and headed out toward the changing rooms near the pitch. Harry gave Hermione and Tonks a last wave.

After they changed, Harry wondered if Ron was going to give a speech. Wood usually had, but Ron hadn't been on the team then. Angelina hadn't been much for speeches. Ron simply said, "Okay, everyone, we can do this. Dennis, you'll be fine, just focus on what you're doing. Harry, the sooner you catch the Snitch, the sooner we get into Hogsmeade. Let's go."

They headed out. "Very inspirational, Ron," teased Ginny.

"I liked it better than Wood's," Harry countered. "He always wanted to make it sound like the history of the universe would be affected by the match. I think keeping it low-key is better."

"Thank you," Ron said, raising his eyebrows at Ginny.

The crowd were already in their seats, the atmosphere one of excitement, as usual. They walked onto the pitch. Dumbledore was there talking to Madam Hooch, which surprised Harry. He assumed it had to do with security, that Dumbledore wanted to be on hand in case anything happened. He felt better; Dumbledore's presence was always reassuring.

Dumbledore spoke, his voice magically amplified. "Ladies and gentlemen, a few announcements before the matches begin. Firstly, I am pleased to introduce our new commentator, Mr. Colin Creevey." He got loud applause from Gryffindors, polite applause for Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, and less from the Slytherins. He cheerfully waved at the Gryffindor team.

"Circling the stadium," Dumbledore continued, "are three Aurors from the Ministry of Magic. They are here as an extra security precaution, and I thank them for coming here today." Dumbledore applauded, as did most of the crowd, following his example.

"Lastly, as an additional security precaution, I have arranged for the pitch, and the area directly above it, to be monitored by magic-detection instruments. If any magic is used in the airspace within the field of play, alarms will sound and play will be

stopped. If that should occur, all players should descend to the ground immediately and await further instructions. Madam Hooch?"

"Thank you, Headmaster. Captains, shake hands." Montague, the seventh-year Slytherin captain, stepped forward to meet Ron. Ron knew that Montague would try to crush his hand, so Ron made no bones about doing the same. The handshake looked like a draw; both were probably in pain, Harry thought, but neither would give the appearance of it. The players mounted their brooms.

Madam Hooch blew the whistle, and the players kicked off and shot into the air. Harry flew a standard search pattern, designed to maximize any possibility of seeing the Snitch. A glance behind told him that Malfoy was following him. Why can't he look for it on his own? thought Harry, annoyed. He remembered what Pansy had said, but it was hard for him to keep an eye open for someone right behind him. He was glad that any magic would be detected; there wasn't that much that was non-magical that Malfoy could do to hurt him. Harry returned his mental focus to finding the Snitch, and with half an ear listened to Colin's commentary, which to him sounded surprisingly practiced. Colin's the type who would practice this, Harry thought.

"...and it's Gryffindor in possession, Ginny Weasley with the Quaffle, dodges a Bludger hit by Crabbe, nice bit of flying there... passes to Bell, who immediately drops it to a low-flying Creevey who's past all defenders, he shoots... saved by Bletchley, looked like it was just wide anyway. Bletchley passes to Warrington, who looks to have caught Gryffindor out of position, he's all alone, advancing on Ron Weasley, he's in position, he shoots... right down the middle, saved by Ron Weasley. Bletchley feinted left, Ron started to go for it but was able to lunge back to the center in time to save it, score still zero-zero. Bell with the Quaffle, almost collides with Goyle, Sloper and Kirke on either side, each just knocked a Bludger away..."

Harry stayed in his search pattern, Malfoy still behind him. When he checked on Malfoy, Malfoy had a very smug look, as though he was looking forward to something happening. Harry couldn't help but wonder what it was, but again made himself forget about it and concentrate on the game. Who knows, he thought, maybe this whole attitude is an attempt to distract me, make me lose focus. He again focused his attention on looking for the Snitch. Just to see what Malfoy would do, he went into a dive; Malfoy naturally followed. Trusting his instincts, Harry dodged and weaved through the players on the way down. Malfoy, trying to follow, collided with Crabbe and was lucky to stay on his broom. Colin Creevey couldn't keep a chuckle out of his voice.

"...that's the problem with following, you don't have as much control as the one leading has. Malfoy rights himself and sets off after Potter, who's opened quite a distance between them. Meanwhile, Bell passes to Creevey, who has a shot, takes it..."

blocked. Slytherin in possession, Pucey, passes up to Warrington, intercepted by Ginny Weasley! She passes it to Creevey, who just has to get past Pucey... Creevey shoots and he's fouled! Bletchley dives and misses, it's in for the goal! Creevey's shaken up, took quite a low blow from Pucey there. Well, it's true, Professor," said Colin, as McGonagall shot him a warning look.

Madam Hooch blew the whistle and signaled the foul, which meant that Gryffindor would be given possession again. "Bell with the Quaffle, passes to Ginny Weasley, back to Bell, back to Ginny Weasley again, Creevey trying to get free... Potter and Malfoy still circling, Malfoy still following Potter... Creevey flies straight up, gets more or less a handoff from Ginny Weasley... they head toward the goal passing back and forth to each other... Warrington tries to intercept, fails... Creevey shoots, no, feints left, shoots right, scores! Twenty-zero Gryffindor! Well done, Dennis! Bletchley went for the feint completely, leaving the right goal wide open. Slytherin in possession..."

Harry found himself surprised that Slytherin had not yet committed many egregious fouls; he supposed they would increase as Slytherin fell behind. Over the next fifteen minutes, Slytherin managed one goal against Ron, but Gryffindor scored two more, both by Dennis, for a forty-ten lead. No Gryffindor but Dennis had taken a shot on goal; Ginny had told Harry that she and Katie would try to make sure Dennis took as many shots early as possible, to help him build his confidence. It seems to be working, Harry thought. He continued his search for the Snitch.

"...and Montague shoots, saved by Ron Weasley, who rushed toward Montague at the last moment, cutting off his angles to shoot, nicely done, Ron... Ron passes to his sister, who flies down the field, weaving in and out, avoiding a Bludger from Crabbe... Goyle swings at the other Bludger and misses, nearly falls off his broom... here they come, Ginny Weasley still in possession, Creevey double-teamed by Pucey and Warrington, they must be tired of him scoring... Ginny Weasley to Bell, to Creevey as he shakes off one of his defenders using Kirke as a shield... Creevey going for the goal area, FOULED BY PUCEY!" Colin practically screamed. "Madam Hooch blows the whistle, that was a particularly bad foul, hope Dennis is okay, Katie and Ginny flying over to him to make sure. Yes, he's all right, that's good. He sets up for the penalty shot, he shoots... good! The shot is good, and the score is fifty-ten Gryffindor!"

Harry was still very focused on looking for the Snitch, but checked Malfoy every once in a while. He could never figure out why Malfoy followed him so closely; Harry had the faster broom, Malfoy could never hope to pass him.

"Warrington flies down the field, passes to Pucey, back to Warrington just as a Sloper Bludger nails Pucey, he's rubbing his arm... Warrington flies past a steal

attempt by Ginny Weasley, coming up on Ron Weasley, he shoots, deflected! Ron Weasley gets his fingertips on a certain goal, and the Quaffle flies just outside the right goal. Really nice save there, that's seven saves in eight tries for Ron Weasley, an excellent match for him... Gryffindor in possession, and- Potter dives! I think he's seen it!"

Harry fleetingly wondered how Colin knew he wasn't feinting. He wasn't, however; he saw the Snitch near the ground in roughly the middle of the field. He pushed the Firebolt as fast as it would go, heard Malfoy behind him but knew Malfoy couldn't reach him... he had to keep focused on the Snitch...

Suddenly Harry felt disoriented, as though he was doing something but couldn't remember what it was. He looked around, but couldn't place his surroundings, or why he was there. His broom started to drift.

Then there was a loud noise, like an alarm, filling the stadium and further disorienting Harry. He felt as if he had been dropped into some strange dream and had no idea what to do, or how to go about figuring out what to do. Then he heard Dumbledore's voice, magnified. "All players, please land immediately and do not move once you are on the ground." Feeling as if he barely had wits enough to follow such a simple instruction, Harry slowly headed toward the ground.

"...apparently some magic has been detected on the field of play, the players are setting down, Potter looking none too steady on his broom, as if he had suddenly forgotten how to fly... sorry, Harry... two Aurors are taking up positions at each end of the field, one seems to be escorting Malfoy down to the ground, it'll be interesting to see what this is all about... the score again, fifty-ten Gryffindor when play was stopped-"

McGonagall motioned to Colin to stop talking, which he did. Dumbledore approached Harry as he landed. "Harry, are you all right?" Harry looked dazed, and couldn't think of how to answer the question. Dumbledore took out his wand and waved it at Harry, who felt as if he'd woken up out of a disorienting dream. "Harry, what happened?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry shook his head. "I don't know, I was going for the Snitch, and I suddenly felt like I forgot everything I ever knew, I didn't even know what was going on... I don't know how..." Understanding dawned. "Malfoy," he said, furiously.

"I will take care of it, Harry," Dumbledore assured him. "Stay here, and do nothing." Dumbledore must be thinking that I'll go after Malfoy like I did last year, Harry thought. While the idea was appealing, he wasn't about to do it.

Harry watched Dumbledore walk over to Tonks, who had escorted Malfoy down. Dumbledore talked with Tonks for a moment, then Malfoy. Malfoy looked defiant, as if he were refusing a request. Harry then saw Snape and McGonagall join

the group. There was more discussion, then Harry thought he saw a small object fly out of Malfoy's robes and into Dumbledore's hand. Malfoy had a look of outrage and guilt. Not guilt in the sense of feeling bad, Harry knew, but in the sense of having been caught. Dumbledore talked with Snape, McGonagall, Tonks, and Madam Hooch for another two minutes, then addressed the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please. As you saw, the magic detection devices were activated by the presence of magic on the playing field. The sensors determined that the source of the magic was the Slytherin Seeker, Draco Malfoy, and it was directed at the Gryffindor Seeker, Harry Potter." Out of respect for Dumbledore, the crowd did not boo, but it seemed to Harry that they wanted to. Harry could see Ron and Ginny, staying where they were instructed, looking very angry.

Dumbledore continued, "Mr. Potter, upon landing, was not able to answer any questions until I performed a countercurse. He then reported experiencing sudden and severe disorientation and memory loss. Upon investigation, Mr. Malfoy was discovered to be concealing a device known as a Confundus Beam, which emits a magic similar to the Confundus Curse, but more powerful, causing disorientation and memory loss in its target."

Now, the crowd did boo, though still not as lustily as they might otherwise have. Dumbledore went on, "The disposition of the match is in the hands of Madam Hooch, from whom you will be hearing shortly. Mr. Malfoy, however, will not play Quidditch until further notice, and will be escorted by his Head of House and myself to a meeting to determine further action. I now give you Madam Hooch."

The crowd cheered, partly for Dumbledore and partly for the idea that Malfoy would be disciplined. Madam Hooch stepped forward.

"Such action as we just saw is deeply distressing to those who hope for and expect fair play in sports," she announced. "Professor Dumbledore has informed me that Mr. Potter could easily have fallen off his broom, and that lengthy exposure to the device can cause long-term effects. Therefore, I must discourage this sort of thing in the strongest possible terms.

"Separate from any other sanctions that may or may not be imposed, Mr. Malfoy will not play Quidditch again until such time as I deem fit. An investigation will be conducted to determine who else knew about or assisted this, and they will be penalized as well.

"As for the disposition of this match... Mr. Potter had the Snitch in his sights when he was attacked. In his time at Hogwarts, there has never been a case in which he had the Snitch in his sights but did not end up with it, and he had a clear lead over Mr. Malfoy. I find that had he not been attacked, Mr. Potter would have caught the

Snitch, and I adjudge the result accordingly. The match is declared over, the final score Gryffindor two hundred, Slytherin ten. Thank you."

A loud cheer went up, though probably not nearly as big as it would have been in the case of a normal victory, Harry thought. Still, it would do. He walked toward Ron, then Ginny, putting an arm around their shoulders in congratulations. Both returned the gesture.

"Are you okay?" asked both at the same time.

He nodded. "As far as I can tell... at least I can talk and I know what's going on, so that's something."

"I can't believe he did that," said Ginny furiously.

"I can," said Ron. "Hugo said he wouldn't mind killing Harry, remember?"

The other team members reached them, offering congratulations and making sure he was all right. Hermione had run down to the field as well; Harry assured all of them that he was fine. "Hey, great match, Dennis," he said. Dennis smiled as the others congratulated him as well.

Suddenly Colin spoke over his loudspeaker again. "Dennis Creevey, Harry Potter, would you come up here for a minute, please?" Dennis and Harry shrugged and headed off.

"We'll be waiting for you to join us to watch the other match," said Ron, as he and the others headed off to the seats reserved for the teams.

Harry and Dennis walked up to where Colin was sitting. Colin gestured for them to sit down. "Ladies and gentlemen, Professor McGonagall has given me permission to end each match with a short interview with the 'Star of the Match,' the person most instrumental to the winning team's success. For this match, that person is new Gryffindor Chaser Dennis Creevey, who scored all five of Gryffindor's goals." A big cheer went up from the Gryffindor supporters, and there was polite applause from others.

"But first, I'd like a quick word with the Gryffindor Seeker, Professor Harry Potter, who I'm sure many in the crowd are concerned about. Professor Potter, how do you feel right now?"

"First of all, Colin, on the Quidditch pitch, it's Harry. You can call me 'Professor' in class." This got a chuckle from the crowd. "To answer your question, I feel fine now."

"I understand, Harry, but it sounded like that was a strong Confundus Curse. If you were still a bit confunded, would you be able to tell the difference?"

Harry laughed. "Well, if that's true, Colin, then I'm not the one you should ask, am I? All I can say is I feel like I usually do." Harry turned toward the field, took out

his wand, and a silver stag erupted from his wand and ran the length of the pitch. "Yeah, I think I'm okay," he added, as the impressed crowd applauded.

"Looks that way, Harry. I'm looking forward to working on that one in your classes. Now, were you surprised by what Malfoy did?"

"I'm not surprised that he would use underhanded tactics. He's done it before. I am surprised that he would go this far."

"Is Madam Hooch right, would you have gotten the Snitch?"

"Absolutely. It was in my sights. I had it, no doubt. Malfoy obviously thought so, too."

"Harry, what do you think his punishment ought to be?"

Harry knew he had to swallow his true opinion. "I'm confident that Professor Dumbledore will handle the situation appropriately, Colin. It's not for me to tell him what he should do."

"Any other comments on the match, Harry?"

"Well, as a Seeker, I don't always see that much of the match, as you know. But obviously Ron had a great match, I saw some of his saves... Ginny and Katie flew and passed very well, but moving on to the Star of the Match," Harry continued as Dennis turned red, "Dennis did a great job in his first match, and the rest of us are very proud of him." He patted Dennis on the back; Dennis looked ecstatic at the compliment.

"Thank you, Harry," said Colin. "Now, let's have a few words with Dennis..."

Harry rejoined the rest of the team, half-listening to Colin interview his brother. "You really must be okay, Harry," Katie said, smiling. "That was a nice Patronus. I've seen you do it before, of course, but it's still really good."

Ron leaned in to Harry, so only he and Ginny could hear. "Kind of showing off a bit though, wasn't it?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, you know what a show-off I am," he joked. "I don't know, I guess I felt entitled, after what happened. If I can do a Patronus, I'm probably not too confunded."

"Yeah, leave him alone," protested Ginny. Ron gave her a 'what's with you?' look, then just looked ahead and continued listening to Dennis, who was saying, "...and Ginny and Katie kept passing it to me, and really well. They kept giving me the shots, so of course I was bound to score a lot..."

"At least he noticed," commented Katie.

"Yes, some people would have decided they did it all by themselves," agreed Ginny.

"And, Dennis, what were your feelings about what happened at the end of the match?" asked Colin.

"Of course, I was disgusted and angry, we all were. I think that if Malfoy thinks this is the only way he can beat Harry, then Slytherin should really start looking for a new Seeker." This comment got loud applause. "He's right about that!" agreed Ron loudly.

"Thank you very much. The Star of the Match, Dennis Creevey," Colin finished, to more applause from the crowd. Looking proud and embarrassed, Dennis headed down toward where the rest of the Gryffindor team was sitting, preparing to watch the next match.

"So, what d'you think Malfoy's going to get, Harry?" asked Ron.

"Good question," Harry mused. "Thrown off the team, for sure. Detention, probably, but it seems like Malfoy doesn't think of detention as a deterrent when it comes to me. I don't see what Professor Dumbledore can do, short of expulsion, that would affect Malfoy."

"Expulsion sounds good to me," Ron said emphatically.

Harry shook his head. "Never happen. Professor Dumbledore won't do it, not for something like this. I wouldn't mind either, of course, but no. Probably just loads of detention. Poor Professor McGonagall..."

"Are you aware, Harry, that I am within range of the sound of your voice?" asked a straight-faced but obviously amused McGonagall, who was sitting two rows above them.

"Well, now I am," smiled Harry, to chuckles from the rest of the team. "Besides, I was just expressing sympathy for you."

"It sounded more like pity. I thank you for the thought, but I believe I will do just fine. I plan to have a word with Mr. Filch later, just in case." The whole team laughed heartily, as McGonagall had obviously intended.

"What I can't figure out," said Harry to everyone, "is why Malfoy did it. I can see why he expected not to get caught when we came out onto the pitch, but when Professor Dumbledore made that announcement about the magic detectors, he might as well have been saying the words, 'Malfoy, if you use that thing you'll be caught, so don't do it.' So Malfoy goes ahead and does it anyway. Now, say what you want about Malfoy, he's not an idiot. So, why?"

Ginny shrugged. "The thing we do know is that he's got a real thing for you. Maybe he wanted to get you so badly that he decided not to let the idea of getting caught get in his way. He did the Snackboxes thing even though you warned him."

Ron nodded. "He may not be an idiot, but people can have blind spots, specific areas where they act like idiots."

"Like Harry when it comes to being modest," Ginny suggested.

"Exactly," Ron agreed, smiling at Harry.

"Or like you when it comes to anything to do with emotions," Ginny continued.

"Exactly," Harry couldn't resist saying. Ron looked annoyed as the team laughed. "Actually, I shouldn't talk," Harry admitted. "I only got like I am now because I had to use love to fight off Voldemort. Before that, I was just as repressed as Ron." The team chuckled at that as well.

"I prefer the word 'reserved,' if you don't mind," replied Ron with exaggerated dignity.

"Well, if Voldemort starts invading your mind, I think you'll get un-reserved in a big hurry," Harry said wryly.

"Harry, how do you think you're different, exactly?" asked Dennis. "I mean, what's changed?"

Harry felt like being a bit silly, so he said, "Well, I'll show you, Dennis. Come here and give me a hug."

The team broke up laughing, but to Harry's surprise, Dennis actually got up and walked over for his hug. Harry gave it to him, prompting more laughter, after which a pleased and somewhat embarrassed Dennis sat back down.

"See, Dennis," Harry continued, "last year, I wouldn't have even made that joke, never mind actually hugging you. That's a pretty big difference."

Dennis smiled. "Oh, now you tell me you were just joking," he said, to more laughter. "Don't I feel stupid."

"So are they pretty affectionate in your family, Dennis?" asked Ginny.

Dennis nodded. "Both my parents are always hugging and kissing us, and each other. It just doesn't seem like a big deal."

"I envy you that, Dennis," said Harry. Dennis looked extremely impressed at the idea that Harry Potter envied him anything. "It wasn't like that for me, as you know. It must be nice."

"I guess you get used to it, you don't think about it that much," Dennis pointed out. "It just seems normal. What about your family, Ginny?"

"Oh, it's probably about usual. The men are all pretty... reserved, I should say," she said, grinning at Ron. "Ron will grudgingly deal with emotion if he has to, the twins just make a joke about it, like they do about everything, and Percy pretends it doesn't exist. I think Bill and Charlie are a bit more relaxed, and so is Dad, but he was never a big hugger. Mum, of course, will hug and kiss anything that moves. Being the only other woman in the family, I guess I'm more like her. One thing I will say, I definitely approve of this new direction of Harry's." She smiled at him teasingly.

"Which new direction?" asked Hermione, just having joined them.

"Hugging people all the time," replied Ginny.

"Oh, yes, I like that too," agreed Hermione. Ron snickered.

"Well, I wouldn't say 'all the time,'" pointed out Harry. "I think I hadn't done it for a few weeks at least, until now."

"Well, you'll have to step up the pace, Harry," said Ginny. "I'll scour Gryffindor Tower for volunteers. I think I might find a few."

"Count me in," said Katie.

"And after hearing I got one, my sister will be demanding one," joined in Dennis.

"There does seem to be a lot of demand, Harry," smiled Ginny. "Maybe it's time to get another petition started."

Harry laughed along with the rest; he found it hard to be bothered by being teased about that.

Their joking was interrupted by Madam Hooch announcing the start of the Hufflepuff-Ravenclaw match. Harry didn't care that much which of these teams won, but found himself pulling a bit for Ravenclaw. He still liked Cho, and hoped for her sake that Ravenclaw would do well in the Quidditch Cup. As well as second place, he told himself.

Harry found while watching the game that he enjoyed listening to Colin's commentary more than when he was playing. He thought Colin was quite good, at least as good as Lee, and less obviously biased. He mentioned this to Dennis, who said that he'd relay it to Colin.

Ravenclaw did end up winning, by a score of one hundred ninety to one hundred twenty; Hufflepuff appeared on the verge of a big win when Cho came up with the Snitch. Harry applauded enthusiastically, while the others did so politely. "Don't be so excited, Harry," Ron warned. "They'll probably beat Slytherin, so if we beat Hufflepuff, we'll be playing them for the Cup."

"And if that happens, I'll be doing everything I can to beat her, I promise," said Harry with mild sarcasm, as if Ron should never have doubted it. Ginny raised her eyebrows, but said nothing. "Besides," continued Harry, "look how many goals they got scored off of them. I have a feeling the Ravenclaw Keeper isn't going to be the Star of the Match."

"No, he'll have to pick Cho," Dennis agreed. "Nobody else for Ravenclaw did well enough."

"It's funny how Quidditch is, really," said Hermione. "There's all this scoring and defending and chasing, but what it really comes down to is the team that gets the Snitch wins. I mean, Hufflepuff was clearly the better team, but because Cho got the Snitch, they lost. Wouldn't it be better if the Snitch counted for less, like fifty or sixty points, so it would be a big advantage but not a guaranteed win?"

Ron shook his head. "That's part of the fun of Quidditch. It's unpredictable. Anyone could win at any time."

"No matter how good or bad they are? I thought the whole point of sports was to be the better team, not to be luckier."

"It's not luck, Hermione. In all of Harry's matches in which he's ended up on his broom, he's gotten the Snitch seven times out of seven. Not to mention, once with a broken arm. Today should have been eight, would have been... you see my point. Harry's skillful, not lucky."

"I didn't mean that, Harry," Hermione protested. "I know you're good. But isn't it the case that in any game, the Snitch could suddenly appear closer to the other Seeker than to you, and you can't get it no matter how good you are?"

"Yes, that's true," Harry admitted. "It could happen."

"But that's not right in one way, Hermione," protested Ron, having sunk his teeth into the argument. "You make it sound as though if one Seeker sees the Snitch and is closer, that's it, it's over. But it often doesn't work that way. You heard Madam Hooch saying that every time Harry gets the Snitch in his sights, he ends up with it. But that's why he's so good; usually that's far from the case. The Snitch darts around so much, it's very hard to catch. So, yes, there is a bit of luck, but the better Seeker will end up with the Snitch at least three times out of four, probably more."

"Cho Chang, would you come over here, please?" asked Colin.

"Even so," Hermione persisted, "it still seems that the Seeker has a disproportionate effect on the outcome of the game. It seems to me that you might as well just have a game in which only two Seekers look for a Snitch."

"I don't know, Hermione, I feel pretty useful," Ginny said. "In fact, I like being a Chaser better than I liked being a Seeker last year. There's more action, it's more fun. I know I don't have the same effect on the outcome of the game, but I don't think that's all there is to sports."

Hermione shrugged. "It seems strange to me, but maybe there's something about sports that I just don't get."

They stopped talking to listen to Cho talking to Colin, who had just asked her how she had found the Snitch. "Well, Colin, it just popped up not too far from where I was. It was just good luck, really."

"See?" said Hermione, amused. Ron gave her an annoyed look.

"Do you have any general comments on the match, Cho?" asked Colin.

"Well, Hufflepuff played well, obviously, we were fortunate to end up with the win. They did an excellent job. Also, I'd like to congratulate them for playing without feeling the need to resort to Confundus Beams or other low and sickening means of

cheating." This denunciation of Malfoy's tactics brought a large cheer from the crowd, including Slytherins.

"I take it that you're unhappy with what happened to Harry," said Colin unnecessarily.

"That's putting it mildly, Colin. I was disgusted and appalled, and not just because Harry's a personal friend. He really could've been hurt. Harry was too polite to answer your question about Malfoy earlier, but I'm not. I think he ought to be expelled." This got a big cheer from the two-thirds of the crowd that had remained to hear the interview with Cho. "And if he were reinstated onto the Slytherin team, and our next match is against them, I'd refuse to play." There was more applause. "Well, maybe I'd play if they strip-searched him before the match." This got a big laugh. "But he still disgusts me. And I'm sorry that your brother, who had such a great first match, had to have it end under circumstances like that."

The Gryffindor team was still listening, and hearing that, they cheered and congratulated Dennis, who was still embarrassed, but enjoying the attention.

"Thank you, Cho. Ladies and gentlemen, the Star of the Match, Cho Chang." The crowd gave one last round of applause, and headed out of the stadium, as did Harry and his teammates.

"Well, good for her," said Hermione, walking out with them. "I know you couldn't say what you thought, Harry, but I'm glad she did."

"After today, I don't think Malfoy will have many sympathizers left," said Ron. "The other three houses already didn't like him, and now he's upset the Slytherins who like you, and the Slytherins who really wanted to win the Cup, since he helped them lose that match."

Harry was on the left side of the group, with only Ginny on his left. He asked her, "So, are you going into Hogsmeade with us?" She looked around to make sure there was no one listening, and pulled him aside, letting the others go ahead.

"I'd love to, Harry, but I'm not going to. Some of my fifth year friends have been annoyed with me lately, saying that I prefer being with you and Ron and Hermione to being with them. Well, they didn't say it exactly, but they've been making jokes, and I can tell they're not happy. So I'm going to spend most of the time in Hogsmeade with them."

Harry was surprised; he hadn't known that she had that problem. "Sure, no problem," he said.

"It is for me," Ginny said, clearly unhappy. "To be honest, Harry, I'd rather spend the time with you three. I'm not as close to them as I am to you, I enjoy spending time with you more. But they're my dormitory-mates, and if I started

spending all my time with you three, I'd estrange myself from them, and I don't want that."

"I can understand that," Harry agreed. "It's too bad you're not in the same year as us, then this wouldn't be a problem. When did this start?"

"Mainly in the weeks after your fight with Voldemort. During that week, I spent as much time with you as I could, of course, and they understood that. But I unconsciously did it a lot afterwards, too, and they slowly started to feel like I thought they weren't good enough for me. And that's not the case, but how do I explain to them that while I like them, I like you more? So I want to put more effort into spending time with them. I just don't want you to think that I don't want to be around you guys all of a sudden."

Harry put a reassuring arm around her shoulders as they walked. "Don't worry, we're not going to think that," he said. She chuckled. "What?" he asked.

"It's just that they've already made a couple of jokes about how you're my boyfriend. This is only going to encourage them," she said, referring to his arm.

"Oh, sorry," he said, starting to move his arm away. Ginny reached up and firmly moved it to where it was before. "I didn't say I wanted you to stop," she said, putting her arm around his waist. They laughed, then he gave her shoulders a squeeze, and they let go. "Like I said, I want to encourage this new direction."

"I suppose I should be sure to do that with Hermione in public, too, so people won't get the wrong idea," Harry joked.

"Well, then they'll just think you can't decide which of us you want, and you're leading both of us on," she pointed out. "So you can't win, really. There's no point in worrying about what people are going to think."

"I guess I've been a celebrity long enough that I should have figured that out by now," Harry agreed. He suddenly remembered something she'd said on the Hogwarts Express at the end of the last term. "So, you're not going to spend any of the time this weekend with Dean?"

She glanced at him, confused. "Why would I-oh, that," she said, then chuckled. "No, I was just messing with Ron. Almost every time I say something about being interested in this boy or that boy, he gets all weird, like he doesn't approve. Like it's any of his business who I see anyway. I don't need him hovering over me, making judgments about who I should or shouldn't see, so I'm hoping to break him of the habit by telling him a new name every now and then. Maybe he'll get tired of hearing about it and leave me alone. I've decided that if he really ticks me off, I'll tell him I'm interested in Crabbe or Goyle."

"That's mean," he said, as they both laughed. They said goodbye as they entered the castle.

Most of the school's students who were third years or older went directly from the stadium to Hogsmeade. Harry went back to Gryffindor Tower to change, and told Ron, Hermione, and Neville that he wanted to speak to Dumbledore quickly before going to Hogsmeade. So they decided that they would go ahead, and he would join them when he was finished.

He headed down the corridors to Dumbledore's office. He was about to turn one corner when he heard voices coming from ahead. He stopped because it sounded like Malfoy. He glanced around to make sure he wasn't seen behaving stealthily, then casually lingered where he was for a moment. The voices became clearer. He heard Malfoy saying, "...talking to Crabbe and Goyle. He was just introducing the stupid announcer, I thought it was going to be dumb stuff like that."

Harry then heard Snape's voice. "Then you deserve what you get, as much for stupidity as for breaking the rules," Snape said coldly. "I have told you many times that the headmaster is a person to be taken seriously, not only..." Harry couldn't hear any more as they walked away. He turned the corner and continued walking.

Harry could barely stifle a laugh. He hadn't been listening! Malfoy's contempt for Dumbledore had done him in, Harry thought gleefully. He hadn't thought Dumbledore would say anything worth listening to. As he approached Dumbledore's office, Harry put his neutral face back on. This kind of reaction wasn't something he wanted Dumbledore to see. He knocked, the door opened.

"Ah, Harry, yes, I thought you might be stopping by. First of all, you have suffered no lingering effects from the Confundus Beam, I trust?" Harry nodded. "Good. I was sure my countercurse was thorough, but it is good to get confirmation. Now, was there something you wanted to ask me?"

"Well, one thing was that I was wondering why he would have done it, knowing that there was a magic-detection field up, but I just found that out on the way here." He explained what he'd heard in the halls.

Dumbledore nodded. "I put up the magic-detection field in hopes that it would discourage him from using the Beam; I would have preferred to avoid even a small risk of injury to you. But fortunately, the field identified the Beam so quickly that there was no chance for it to cause lasting harm."

Harry took a few seconds to process this. "You mean, you knew about the Beam before the match? How?"

"Pansy Parkinson came to me an hour before the match. She had just discovered what Mr. Malfoy was planning, and was unable to get to you covertly. It is better that she came to me, in any case. I knew to take her warning seriously; you may not have."

Harry thought again. "She shouldn't have done that," he said, worried. "Malfoy could figure out where it came from, and she could be in danger."

"On the contrary, Harry, she did exactly the right thing," Dumbledore replied. "This was not a mere prank; you could have been in serious danger. What she did today is exactly the sort of thing she hopes to accomplish by staying undercover."

"In any case, he will not figure it out. The magic-detection field, while not something I had planned to do, is a plausible enough security precaution that its presence would not raise suspicion. Mr. Malfoy will readily believe that he was the victim of unfortunate happenstance, and his own inattention. No suspicion will fall on Pansy."

"But if a few things like this happen, it will. She has to be very careful about what she lets us know. With enough evidence, Malfoy will suspect her."

"Yes, Harry, but it is we who must be careful, not she. We are the ones who use or do not use the information. We must judge its importance, weighed against the possible risk to her. In the intelligence trade, there is such a thing as 'information so good it cannot be used.' This refers to very important information which, it is known to both sides, could only have come from one source. The side receiving the information must make a difficult choice. If they use the information, the other side will know, and the spy's cover is blown. A highly important spy can no longer be used. But if they do not use the information, then it was not so useful to have the spy. The spy's current information must be weighed against possible cumulative future information. It is usually not an easy choice to make."

"Don't you also have to think about the risk to the spy?" Harry asked, surprised that Dumbledore had not included this in his list of considerations.

"Of course one does, Harry, and in that sort of situation, it is usually possible to extract the spy before the sensitive information is used. But at high levels of statecraft, such information can save thousands of lives. Many spies have a sufficient sense of loyalty to the side they are working for that they would sacrifice their lives to save so many others. It depends on the person, of course."

"Well, I don't want Pansy taking that kind of risk for me," Harry said firmly. "The last thing I need is someone else dying for me."

"It is extraordinarily unlikely, Harry, which she understands as well. But what risk there is, she wishes to take. I strongly urge you not to criticize her in any way for what she has done, but rather to praise her. She needs to know that what she is doing is useful. It is very hard for her. You may express concern for her safety, but you must honor the risks she takes. As I have honored the risks you have taken in your time here at Hogwarts, rather than tried to stop you out of concern for your safety."

Harry was silently frustrated for a minute, looking around at various things in Dumbledore's office. He regarded the portraits of the former headmasters, all pretending to be sleeping. He walked over to Fawkes, and petted him for a few seconds. Finally he sat back down in the chair opposite Dumbledore's desk.

"I guess I haven't made things easy for you over the past five years, have I?" Harry grudgingly admitted. "Always jumping in front of dangerous things, when you'd tried so hard to keep me alive. You could have justified stopping me by my age, but you didn't. And I know how badly Pansy wants to help me." He paused again, defeated. "All right, I understand, of course you're right." Harry looked at Dumbledore with a pained expression. "This is only going to get harder, isn't it?"

Dumbledore nodded sympathetically. "Yes, and it could get much harder. I wish that were not the case, but it is. You may recall that this is a variation on the conversation we had after Hermione was Cursed."

Harry realized that was true. His further thoughts were cut off by the door being knocked on, and opening. Snape entered, followed by a nervous Pansy Parkinson. "Ah, thank you, Severus. Good afternoon, Pansy."

Pansy blanched when she saw Harry. She looked at him, then Dumbledore, then Snape. It was easy to see what she was thinking.

"Professor Snape is aware of your situation, Pansy," Dumbledore said reassuringly, though Pansy did not look reassured. "He can be relied upon to keep the utmost discretion." She looked back at Snape as though he were a stranger, then back to Harry again. Her eyes asked the question, do you trust him?

Harry nodded without hesitation. "I trust Professor Snape," he said. She breathed a sigh of relief, and flew into his arms. "You're okay, right?" she whispered. "I'm fine, thanks to you," he whispered back. She backed away and looked into his eyes. His expressed concern, pride, and gratitude; hers, affection and relief. Harry reflected that a lot of communication was done without speaking.

Responding to Harry's last non-whispered comment, Snape said, annoyed, "It is more accurate to say, Professor Potter, that you trust the headmaster, and he trusts me. It works out the same, of course, but I never would have supposed that a student of my own house would have required you to vouch for my trustworthiness."

"That's because I'm the one she's risking her life to protect," Harry retorted.

"The risk to her life is small in the extreme, Professor," responded Snape, appearing to be trying very hard to remain polite. "It is only your sense of melodrama-"

"Tell that to Hermione," shot back Harry. "If you can tell me there won't be any more Notts, then I'll believe that her life isn't in danger. Can you tell me that?"

"Of course we do not know whether more students will cast their lot with the Dark Lord, Professor, which is why Miss Parkinson's activities are useful. But if she takes sensible precautions, her role need not be discovered. In your concern for her safety, you exaggerate the danger to her considerably."

"I think he's right about that, Harry," Pansy agreed. "You do worry too much."

"Headmaster," nodded Snape, dismissing himself. Dumbledore nodded back, and Snape left.

"Pansy, I agree with you in part," said Dumbledore, "but Harry is in a sense responsible for your life. I have carried such burdens for many years, but it is new to Harry. It is only natural that he be concerned, perhaps to a degree you consider excessive. It is because he cares for you that he does so."

"I know," she said. She turned to Harry and said, "I'll tell you what, Harry. You try not to worry about me so much, and I'll try to be patient with the worrying you do. How about it?"

Harry nodded, not so much because he thought he could do it as because he didn't want to argue about it. He paused. "I also, of course, want to thank you for what you did. Professor, what do you think would have happened if Pansy hadn't warned you?"

"We cannot say for certain, of course, but we can speculate. Mr. Malfoy's Beam was only in contact with you for one second before it was stopped. He could have kept it on you for perhaps five seconds without drawing undue attention, and perhaps longer after he caught the Snitch. After such exposure, you could easily have fallen off your broom, and it is entirely possible that you could have suffered permanent mild brain damage."

Harry continued, being sure to make eye contact with her. "So, that's what you saved me from. I'm very, very grateful."

Her eyes filled with pride; she took his hand, and just nodded. After a moment, she turned to Dumbledore. "So, is he going to get expelled?"

Dumbledore gave her a serious look. "I am aware this is not what you wish to hear, Pansy, but no, he will not."

She stared at him in frustration. "After what he did? After what you said could have happened to Harry? Wouldn't that be considered an assault, worse yet, an assault on a teacher?"

"There are many elements to this, Pansy, which make it difficult to take extreme measures against Mr. Malfoy. Some will seem like technicalities to you, but they are important nonetheless. First of all, on the Quidditch pitch, Harry cannot be considered a teacher, as teachers cannot play Quidditch. For those purposes, he must be considered a student. Secondly, people should not be prosecuted for what

they could have done, but simply what they did. Mr. Malfoy admitted cheating to try to win the match, but denied any intent to cause permanent damage to Harry. If Harry had in fact been permanently damaged, then expulsion would be in order. I know you believe-

"It's not what I believe, it's what I heard," she interrupted. "I heard him say that he hoped that Harry would end up, quote, sounding like one of those house-elves he likes so much, unquote. That sounds like intent to me."

"Unfortunately, Pansy, that is simply talk, and cannot be prosecuted. To take a further example, after Hugo Brantell's first visit here, he told me that he was sure that Mr. Malfoy would kill Harry if he thought he could get away with it. You told Harry the same thing, based on your observations of Mr. Malfoy. Should I have expelled him for that? It would be prudent, it would protect Harry. But I could not. Now, there is apparently a better reason, but I must do what I would do if he were any other student. Expulsion, you must realize, is an extremely harsh and final sanction. It requires the highest standard of proof, having such a strong impact on a person's future. We cannot fill in the blanks around Mr. Malfoy's actions with what we feel sure is true; it can only be things we know are true, and can prove. And on the basis of what can be proved, his actions do not merit expulsion."

"His past doesn't count for anything at all?" Pansy demanded.

"Except for the incident with the Skiving Snackboxes, Mr. Malfoy does not have a record of disciplinary problems."

Pansy was still angry. "I could spend the next three hours telling you stories about things he's done that are not only against the school rules, but cruel and abusive as well." She paused. "But I suppose you'll tell me that since it's nothing official, or provable, it can't be considered either."

Dumbledore nodded. "I know it is frustrating. It would be so easy to make small exceptions, especially when we are sure we are right. But proper legal rules must protect the guilty as well as the innocent. It cannot be otherwise. If we start bending the rules to prosecute the guilty, the innocent will suffer as well. History is replete with examples of what happens when we start down that path. Surely you can recall such occasions from your History of Magic classes."

Pansy shook her head. "I can barely keep awake in that class. I've done a lot of daydreaming, though."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows, and looked at Harry, who also shook his head. "Hermione's the only one who can concentrate enough. She was our designated note-taker."

"Hermione sure must come in handy sometimes," said Pansy quietly, no doubt remembering the map.

"Indeed," said Dumbledore, looking dismayed. "I shall have to check into this further, perhaps encourage Professor Binns to make his lectures more accessible. History is a very important, though admittedly less than practical, subject. But you may take my word for it that when we start making concessions to expediency, we head down a dangerous road."

Pansy sighed. "If you say so, sir. It's just hard for me to see that right now. I guess this is the kind of thing the person who has your job has to think about."

"Not only my job, Pansy, I hope. The more people there are who are aware of this sort of thing, the better off our society is. Now, as for Mr. Malfoy, his punishment is as follows. Firstly, he is no longer a member of the Slytherin Quidditch team, and will not be until and unless he undergoes a remarkable change in attitude. Secondly, he will be given twenty hours of detention. As you have noted, Harry, this does not seem to be a deterrent to him, but it should be done for symbolic reasons.

"Lastly, he will temporarily take up residence in different quarters. From now until the Christmas break, he will reside in one of the guest rooms, most recently used by Dean and Seamus. He will stay in the room when not in classes, his meals delivered to him. He will not be allowed visitors." Pansy's expression indicated her relief. "Yes, you will not have to keep up many pretenses to Mr. Malfoy for the next several weeks," agreed Dumbledore.

"Well, sir," said Harry, "it certainly sounds like you did the most you could do without expelling him. I appreciate the effort."

"I also made sure that he understood that any violation of the terms of his sanctions, or other breaking of rules, would be met with immediate expulsion."

"Well, you can bet he'll be on his best behavior, then," said Pansy grimly. "He'll wait until after Christmas, and then figure out a way to take his best shot at Harry. I've gotten the impression lately that he doesn't plan on graduating from Hogwarts—nothing specific, just lots of little things he's said—and I think he'll gather some of his father's Dark Arts collection, and come back here and figure out a way to use it against Harry and not get caught, or escape. You'll have to search his bags when he comes back. You'll also have to search Crabbe's and Goyle's, too." She saw the expression on Dumbledore's face, and her face fell. "You won't search Crabbe and Goyle, because they haven't done anything wrong."

Dumbledore nodded. "In addition, Pansy, things come by mail every day. To perform such searches as would be necessary would turn Hogwarts into a virtual police state. Police states are usually very safe, but people do not wish to live in them."

"I know... but his father's got lots of stuff, and Malfoy'll have no reason to hold back anymore. I guess I'll have my work cut out for me. It's just... Harry's in real danger, sir. I just want him to be safe."

"No more than I do, I assure you. Pansy, has Harry ever told you that I love him?"

Harry smiled, a little embarrassed. "It didn't come up in conversation."

"He said you and he were very close," Pansy said. "He said a lot about you, and it was obvious he has strong feelings for you. But he didn't say how it went in your direction."

"It happened little by little," Dumbledore said. "I felt a little guilty for sending him to live, after his parents were killed, with his relatives. I knew they disliked magic, and were not particularly kind or loving people. When he came to Hogwarts, he very quickly showed the courage and determination of a person far beyond his years. I could not help but admire him as he faced one trial after another, and was equal to them all. As I have told Harry, I could not even say when it happened, but at some point, Harry became as dear to me as any friend or close relative. I would readily give my life to save his. So believe me when I tell you, Pansy, that anything I do which tends to endanger Harry, I do with great reluctance because I feel I must."

Despite her experiences with Harry, Pansy was still not used to people opening up to her in this way. Filled with emotion, she nodded. "I understand, sir. I guess it must be hard for you, caring so much about Harry but needing to do your job, too."

"It is not easy, I admit. I should be used to it by now, it seems, but it is never easy."

Pansy looked at Dumbledore with admiration. "When I was getting to know Harry, back in September, early on he told me lots of personal things about himself. It really surprised me. Now I wonder if it's something he picked up from you."

Harry smiled. "I'm not even sure, to tell you the truth. It wouldn't surprise me, though."

"Another thing, sir," added Pansy. "All my life, I've been used to parents, teachers, whoever, giving instructions and never bother explaining. They'd say 'this is how it's going to be,' and that was that. Not only did you explain it, you really wanted me to understand it, it was important to you. That's pretty amazing to me, and I really respect it. Thank you, sir."

Dumbledore tilted his head in acknowledgment. "A common courtesy, unfortunately too uncommon. I may be a headmaster and you a student, but your feelings are no less important than mine. They, and your safety and Harry's, are very much at issue, so you deserve to be as fully involved in events as possible."

"And sir, thank you for yesterday. It really helped." Harry looked at her blankly as Dumbledore nodded his acknowledgment. "I took your advice, and came to see him yesterday," she said to Harry. "You were right, he was really helpful."

"I was very glad to be able to be of help, Pansy," said Dumbledore.

"Well, I suppose we should get going," said Harry. "The others are waiting for me in Hogsmeade... are you going?" he asked Pansy.

"Well, I was going with him, but now, I'm not sure. I might go in for a bit, but now my day is kind of free. Maybe I'll go spend some time with the first years."

"Good idea," Harry said. "Listen, Pansy... again, I'm really grateful for what you did. The fact that I worry about you doesn't mean I don't appreciate it. Thank you."

"I was so happy to be able to do it, Harry. It's what I got into this for. So when's our next meeting? We still have to be careful, but it'll be a lot easier now."

"How about 4:00 on Monday, usual place?"

She nodded. "Okay, see you then. Professor, thank you again."

"You're very welcome. Pansy, Harry, please enjoy yourselves."

They left, and quickly went in different directions so as not to be seen together. Harry went straight out the castle entrance, and on into Hogsmeade.

Harry thought he would have to look around from shop to shop to find the others, but he ran into Ron and Hermione quickly on the main road. "Where's Neville?" Harry asked.

"He wanted to do some Christmas shopping, he's in the Owl Order Office," said Hermione. "So, what did you hear from Dumbledore?"

Harry related all that had happened. "So Pansy's not happy about Malfoy not getting expelled, but she's really happy that she was able to help me."

"Good thing she went to Dumbledore, you'd have shaken it off and not done anything about it," Ron said, "and we'd be in the infirmary trying to get you to identify a ball and a pen."

"That's not funny, Ron," Hermione chastised him.

He looked at her quizzically. "I wasn't trying to be. I was saying he'd have ended up badly, and should take threats more seriously."

"Oh. Well, all right, then. Let's go join Neville at the Owl Order Office. I'm going to look through their catalogs and find something really nice for Pansy. She deserves it."

"Good idea, that's very nice of you, Hermione," agreed Harry. "I need to go there too."

"Well, I'd go there, but it's kind of depressing if you don't have money to spend," said Ron. "Why don't I just go to the Three Broomsticks and meet you there after you're done?" They agreed to do that, and Ron walked off.

When he was sure Ron was out of their hearing range, Harry said to Hermione, "I wish I could just give Ron a bag of Galleons, but I know he'd never take it."

She looked at him knowingly. "If your positions were reversed, Harry, neither would you."

"This is one of those 'I hate it when you're right' situations," said Harry. "No, I wouldn't. But I still wish he would." They walked on in silence for a minute. "Hermione, I have a question. In wizarding history, can you think of any times when bad things happened when well-intentioned people started bending laws and rules in the name of expediency?"

"Sure, there's been lots of times like that. Probably the most famous is the series of events that led to the schism with the centaurs back in 1388. Prior to that, some centaurs lived in close proximity to humans, and had similar rights. Now, some people got it in their heads that..." She suddenly eyed him appraisingly. "Are you really interested in this?"

He shrugged lightly. "Not every last detail, but the general outline, yes. Professor Dumbledore was disappointed that Pansy or I couldn't think of any situations like that. I'd like to be able to tell him I know of at least one."

Amused, she asked, "Now do you wish you'd paid more attention in History of Magic?"

"Like Pansy said, it's a major accomplishment not to fall asleep in History of Magic," Harry said defensively.

"Okay... anyway, some people decided that the centaurs were responsible for the spread of a disease that was going around..." She kept talking until well after they were in the Owl Order Office. Harry found, to his surprise, that he was actually interested.

They met Neville in the office, and Harry told him the major details of the meeting with Dumbledore, leaving out any mention of Pansy. "He wasn't even listening?" asked Neville in amazement, smiling. "Couldn't happen to a nicer guy..." Harry was not inclined to slap Neville's wrist for his indulgence in Schadenfreude.

Harry had been talking to Neville for a few minutes when Hermione, across the room, motioned Harry over. He came, and she showed him a catalog from a rare goods shop. "Look, this is perfect!" she said.

To Harry's surprise, he was familiar with what she was pointing at. It was a set of two small notebooks which people could use to communicate in writing over a distance. Harry could not look at them without a twinge of regret that he had never

used the one that Sirius had given him; they were not exactly the same, but similar. "You think I should use them with her?" asked Harry.

"No, Harry, I don't mean you. You meet with her a lot already. I'm talking about me. She could use it in her dormitory on her bed at night, it would give her another person to talk to. What do you think?"

Harry didn't know what to think, exactly. On the one hand, Pansy would probably welcome another person to talk to. On the other hand, she and Hermione weren't exactly similar types. But then again, neither are Ron and Hermione, and they get along, so I shouldn't discourage her, he thought. "I think it's very nice of you. I have to think she'd appreciate it and welcome it."

She smiled, but looked concerned. "I hope so, Harry, but I just found a problem. I didn't see the price at first. Look at that, fifty Galleons! After my Christmas shopping, I've only got a little over twenty left... Harry, maybe Ron won't take money from you, but I will. What do you think?"

"Well, I'm definitely inclined to be generous to someone who may have saved me from brain damage. Tell you what, why don't you let me pay for the whole thing."

"Oh, Harry, you don't have to, I can always get more money from my parents..."

He leaned over, close to her. "Hermione, do you know what I get paid for being a teacher?"

Her eyes widened. "Oh, that's right, you get paid! I forgot about that! You never mentioned it!"

"I didn't think about it myself, until I got the first pay at the end of September. After that, I didn't say anything because of Ron, I didn't want it to sound like bragging..."

She nodded. "I can understand that. So, how much is it?"

"Three hundred and fifty Galleons a month."

"Wow! That's really good! I read that the average salary for British wizards is two hundred eighty-eight Galleons a month, and you don't even have expenses!"

He nodded. "And I've got quite a lot of gold in my vault. I may have a lot of problems in my life, Hermione, but money isn't one of them. So, just let me pay for this, okay?"

"I withdraw my objections, Harry. You may pay for it. After they arrive, we'll set up another meeting with Pansy so I can give hers to her and explain how they work."

Fortunately, Harry had brought most of his gold-on-hand into Hogsmeade, so he had no trouble paying. He took a few catalogs so he could look for gift ideas later

that night, then all three left to meet Ron at the Three Broomsticks, where they ate, drank butterbeer, talked, and reveled in the morning's victory. Upon their return to Gryffindor Tower, they joined the victory party in progress, except for Hermione, who slipped away unnoticed early on. People praised and teased Dennis, who looked like he'd never enjoyed himself so much. Harry remembered feeling like that after his first capture of the Snitch, and he was very happy for Dennis. Eventually, he went up to his dormitory bed and spent an hour looking through the catalogs, deciding what to order the next day. Finally, he went to sleep. It had been a very good day.

Chapter 15

Hogsmeade

Harry slept in the next morning, waking up at 10:30. Fawkes was there, on his new perch, next to Harry's bed. "Good morning, Fawkes," said Harry, and reached up and petted him for a minute. He got dressed and left the empty dormitory; as he turned to go, Fawkes flew over and landed on Harry's shoulder. "Feel like getting outside today?" he asked facetiously, knowing Fawkes could go anywhere he wanted, anytime, not needing Harry to do it.

Harry went to the Great Hall and met his friends at their usual area of the Gryffindor table. They said hello to him and to Fawkes as he sat down. "So, when he does this, it's usually for the whole day, isn't it?" asked Ron.

"So far, yes," Harry agreed. "It's nice to have him along."

"That'll turn a few heads in the Three Broomsticks, Harry Potter and his phoenix," Ron pointed out.

Harry shrugged. "Imagine what my life would be like if I let things like that bother me," he said. "I'd never get out of bed in the morning."

"Guess I hadn't thought of it that way," Ron conceded. "I suppose most of the time it doesn't occur to me that you're, you know, Harry Potter."

"And that's probably one reason I'm comfortable with you guys, that you don't think of that. Going into Hogsmeade... I mean, it's fun, but there are a lot more reminders that I'm Harry Potter there. Sometimes I almost dread graduating from Hogwarts, because out in the real world, I'll get treated much more as Harry Potter, and less whoever I really am."

"There should be some place where you can go to get trained as a celebrity," said Hermione sympathetically. "But look at it this way, Harry... thank goodness there aren't tabloids in the wizarding world like there are in the Muggle world."

Harry cringed at the thought. "I don't even want to think about that."

"But we have tabloids, like the Quibbler," Ron pointed out.

"These are a whole different thing, Ron," explained Hermione. "One of the big things they do is report on, or should I say, gossip about, celebrities' lives, usually with a fair bit of fiction mixed in. Also, they're daily. If there was a magical version of that type, they'd never stop writing about Harry, and it wouldn't be anything he'd like."

"'Harry Potter's Ten Tips To Attract a Phoenix,'" Harry joked.

"Yes, something like that," agreed Hermione. "Or last year, you and Cho... 'Potter girlfriend seen storming out of cafŽ crying, Hogsmeade abuzz...' imagine that."

"I'm trying not to," Harry said. "I will say that if you're trying to make me feel not so hard put about being a celebrity, you've succeeded."

"Thank you, Harry. By the way, have you heard from the Aurors lately?"

"Yes, a few. I got a letter from Cassandra Banks the other day. She said that they're all trying so hard to focus on love that she's never seen a more peaceful group of Aurors. No one's managed the spell yet, though. Apparently Kingsley thought he had it last week, had it tested, and failed."

"Ouch," said Hermione, wincing.

"Yeah, I kind of winced, too. At least I had the benefit of not being able to do anything about it, but they're choosing to try it. Cassandra said that they've had such a hard time that by now they would have concluded that it was something unique to me, if not for the fact that Dumbledore can do it too. They really want to get this. I feel bad that I can't do more to help them."

"They may just need more time, Harry. You were trying to focus on love way back in August, when we started the Occlumency lessons. Also, you may have discovered it, but that doesn't make it your fault if they can't learn it."

"Yeah, I know. Dumbledore's tried to help them too. Anyway, she said they want to ask me to visit them at their training center at the beginning of Christmas vacation. Said they'd be testing and picking my brains every day if it wasn't for my job and my studies."

"You know, there's been one nice side benefit of all this. You already have a relationship with them, so when you become an Auror, you'll know them already."

"Yeah, that is nice," agreed Harry. "But, and I'm trying to overcome my modesty to tell you this, they-"

"And we appreciate that you're trying so hard not to annoy us," she interrupted.

"Yes, thank you, anyway, some of them act like I'm one of them already, since they know I want to be one. Dumbledore told them about my 100, and combining that

with the new spell, Fawkes, and the Voldemort thing, they assume it's in the bag. It does embarrass me-I mean, I haven't earned anything yet-but it is nice to have them treat me like that."

"The good thing about that," said Ron, "is that the things they're impressed by have nothing to do with you being Harry Potter. You must like that, too."

Harry nodded. "Yes, exactly. I'm happy about that. So much comes my way because I'm Harry Potter that I kind of assume that some things are that way even when they're not."

"Yes," said Hermione, "kind of like, someone walks up to you on the street, and you think it's because you're Harry Potter and they might want an autograph, and then it turns out they just wanted directions."

"Yes, something like that. Of course, then I'd feel pretty stupid."

Neville walked in and sat down. "Hey, Neville," Harry said, "do you think you'd still want to be friends with me if I wasn't Harry Potter?"

Neville looked very caught off guard, as if it were a trick question. "But then you wouldn't be you, would you? You'd be someone else."

Harry and Ron exchanged a look. "Hard to argue with that," Ron said.

"I wouldn't want to try," Harry agreed. He went back to his food.

Hermione looked exasperated. "What Harry means, Neville, is what if-"

Neville broke into a smile. "If it was Harry's personality and appearance but his name wasn't Harry Potter, I know. I was just having some fun."

Harry and Ron now exchanged startled looks. Hermione gaped at Neville, who laughed shyly. Harry smiled and said, "Very good, Neville, you definitely got us. But it almost wasn't fair, because you've never done that before. Next time, we'll be on the lookout for it."

Neville chuckled. "Anyway, your question... I think so, Harry. I mean, like most people, for a while I was impressed that you were Harry Potter, but if you live in the same dormitory with someone for a while, you get used to them. I can't remember the last time I thought, wow, this is Harry Potter! Now I just associate the name to your personality, while most people just think of the Boy Who Lived."

A fleeting look of annoyance crossed Harry's face before he answered. "I guess that makes sense."

Hermione had caught the look. "You've never cared for being known as the Boy Who Lived, have you, Harry? I mean, I think you really don't like the phrase."

Harry considered. "I think I use it kind of sarcastically when I do. Like, when Malfoy tried to ambush me over the summer, I taunted him by saying that the Boy Who Lived was back in favor at the Ministry. I think I was kind of criticizing the idea that people treat me a certain way because of that. I'm not sure why I should think

it's such a bad thing, now that I think about it, but I think I've never been happy about it."

"Maybe it's because your status as the Boy Who Lived makes people treat you in ways that make you uncomfortable?" Hermione suggested.

"Could be," Harry said. "It may go back to the idea of not feeling deserving of that kind of attention."

"I know," said Ron, as if he'd just had a brilliant idea. "Let's talk about Quidditch!"

"I think you're focusing too much on Quidditch, Ron," said Hermione impatiently.

"Do you not like this topic, Ron?" asked Neville curiously. "I think it's interesting."

Hermione scoffed. "Ron doesn't like anything to do with emotions, or how people think, or anything that would make him think about things like that."

Ron looked irritated. "Maybe a bit, but I just got isolated on the topic. Last year, Harry was with me on this. Now, he isn't. It's all your fault," said Ron with pretended annoyance, speaking last to Harry.

"Sorry, Ron... I just had to be able to sleep at night."

Neville looked at Harry. "So, why would you feel undeserving, Harry?"

Harry told him much the same thing he'd told Pansy. He concluded by saying, "I especially feel that way when I think about you, Neville. I mean, I got all this sympathy and affection, because my parents were killed, but look at yours. Yours suffered worse than mine; at least with mine, it was over quickly. But you don't get this kind of sympathy, this kind of attention. You deserve it at least as much as I do, maybe more."

Ron, Hermione, and Harry were all looking at Neville, wondering what he would say. His parents' fate didn't come up often as a topic of conversation. Neville looked uncomfortable for a second, then looked at Harry.

"I'm sure we weren't the only ones. Lots of other kids had to have lost their parents. In some ways, you're kind of a symbol for those of us who did. But I do get sympathy, if not nearly as much as you. Mainly from people my gran knows, but even sometimes from people she barely knows that we run across in public, people who knew my parents. They say nice things about my parents, say how sorry they were about what happened. I have a feeling that they're more uncomfortable, though, than people are with you. With you, yours are dead, that's final, simple. Mine are insane, still alive, but gone in any way that matters." Harry, Ron, and Hermione's expressions all turned pitying without their even realizing it. "So they can't talk about them as if

they're dead, but they can't ask how they're doing, either. It's uncommon enough that people don't know what to say. They end up looking at me a lot like you're looking at me right now."

"I'm sorry, Neville," said Hermione, "but I don't see how we could do anything else. Of course we feel bad for you, just like we do for Harry."

"I know the one you mean, Neville," said Harry. "Believe me, I've seen it a lot too. First I get the 'Oh my God, it's Harry Potter,' then the stare at the forehead, but then I get that look too. Is that why you didn't tell anyone here for a long time?"

Neville nodded; Harry could tell he was... not exactly happy to talk about it, but that it felt good to do so, with people he could trust. "I knew what reactions I'd get, and I'd already seen enough of that. Not to mention what people like Malfoy... can you imagine what I'd have heard from him if he'd known all this time? 'Hey, Longbottom, how's the folks?'" Neville looked angry just at the thought. "I couldn't deal with that."

Harry nodded. "It would've been bad. I remember last year, you charging Malfoy because he made a crack about people in St. Mungo's."

"I'm still not happy that you stopped me," Neville said forcefully.

"Neville, Crabbe and Goyle would have pounded you."

Neville looked defiant. "There are some things worth being pounded for, Harry. I'd think that you of all people would understand that."

Harry nodded sadly. "I do. I'm sorry I stopped you, Neville."

Neville nodded his thanks. "You saw at St. Mungo's how Gran is, how she was unhappy that I hadn't told people, that I hadn't told you. The fact is, I should have trusted you by then, you three at least. It's just not something you bring up, out of the blue. But Gran doesn't understand about people like Malfoy. She doesn't realize that what won't bother her will bother an eleven-year-old. I've never been ashamed of my parents. I am proud of them, especially now that I know they might have been trying to save me. But that doesn't mean I have to go announcing it to everyone. Not everyone will understand." He looked at each one. "But I am sorry I didn't tell you earlier."

Ron spoke first. "Believe me, Neville, no one feels like you did anything wrong. I'm sure I'd have done the same if I were you. You had a bad enough situation."

Harry and Hermione nodded. "Neville, do you know how many times I've done this," Harry said as he moved his hair down to cover his scar, "to try to avoid being recognized? In fact... I never told you guys this before, but..." He told them about how at the beginning of his third year he'd lied to the Knight Bus operators, telling them he was Neville. The other three all laughed, Neville hardest of all.

"Well, it was nice of you to think of me, Harry," Neville finally said. "I probably wouldn't have found it so funny then, but it's hilarious now, I'm not sure why."

Harry smiled. "I'm glad you got a laugh out of it. Of course, at that time I was trying not to be recognized because I thought I was in trouble, but usually it was because I didn't want to be fawned over, or because I didn't want the reactions that you were trying to avoid here. So I would never blame you for that."

"Thanks," Neville said, "but you shouldn't have had to find out like you did."

"Neville," Hermione said hesitantly, "you go there every Christmas, right?" Neville nodded. "How does that feel? I mean, it seems like it might be really depressing."

Neville breathed deeply. "It has been, sometimes. But Gran has what I think is the right attitude about it. She says we go there to honor them, to let their spirits know we care about them, wherever they are. Yes, it is a reminder of what happened to them, but it probably isn't any worse than visiting a cemetery. People talk to gravestones as if the people could hear them, and maybe they can. I talk to my parents, knowing they can't hear me in one way, but probably can in another."

Harry felt emotion rising up, and noticed he wasn't the only one. Ron looked unusually somber, obviously trying to keep control. Tears were already trickling down Hermione's cheeks. Seeing this, Neville stood up. "I think I've eaten as much as I need to, got to leave some room for candy," he said with a small smile. "Let's go on into Hogsmeade." The others all got up, and they walked out of the Great Hall. As they did, Harry saw Neville and Hermione put their arms around each other for a moment, as if each realized that the other needed to be comforted.

They had a good time, as they usually did in Hogsmeade. They went to the usual places: Honeydukes, where they all got candy, and the Three Broomsticks, where Fawkes did in fact draw a lot of attention Harry's way. They stayed for a couple of hours, drinking butterbeer and talking about their classes, Harry talking about the classes he was teaching as well as taking. Hermione recalled Sirius having said that the Three Broomsticks would have made a better spot than the Hog's Head to have their meeting last year, and said that she doubted that twenty-six people having a meeting there would have been inconspicuous. Harry found it hard to disagree.

Unsurprisingly, they saw many people they knew. Harry walked over at one point to a table of Gryffindor third years, to congratulate Dennis again on his Quidditch performance. Harry also knew that his visit would make Dennis proud in front of his peers, which was another reason he did it. As he walked back to his table, he found himself saying hello or stopping at almost every other table. He realized that now that he was a teacher, and had taught for two months, he now knew

most everyone in the school; it was only the seventh years that he had never taught nor been in class with. It was a strange feeling, but a good one; it made him feel more connected to the whole school.

As they walked out it was mid-afternoon, and the weather, so nice yesterday, was getting cooler and cloudy. Ron suggested a stop at Zonko's, but the others weren't interested; neither Hermione nor Neville had ever been practical jokers, and Zonko's didn't have as much appeal to Harry as it used to. Harry wondered whether it was because he was older, or because he was a teacher. Ron shrugged and they continued walking.

They went into the Owl Order Office, and Harry and Ron placed their Christmas orders. Neville and Hermione, having already done so the previous day, looked at catalogs and chatted. After they were done, they went back out to the road, and continued walking until the end. Harry, Hermione, and Ron recalled the time they'd met Sirius there and followed him up the hill to have a private chat, and told Neville about it. They ended up standing around, talking about Sirius and the events of their third year, for almost a half hour. Neville, never having heard the stories before, was fascinated.

"So, you saved your own life?" Neville asked Harry as he started back down the road.

"In a way, yes; the later me saved the earlier me," said Harry.

"But shouldn't the earlier you have died, and then because of that, there would be no later you?" Neville asked. It was a good question, Harry thought. He had wondered that very thing before.

"You'd think so, Neville," Harry agreed. "I don't know how it works, to be honest."

"You think it's going to rain, Harry?" asked Ron. "It's starting to get pretty dark for this early in the afternoon."

"Yeah, I think so too," Harry agreed. "Well, we're just about done here anyway. I was just thinking about getting some butterbeer to take back for the first and second years, who can't come here."

"Oh, that's a very nice thought, Harry," said Hermione. "I'm sure they'll-"

She was interrupted by Fawkes, who suddenly lifted off Harry's shoulder and flew ahead, emitting a loud burst of song. It was almost startling in its surprise and intensity.

"What in the world-" Harry started, then stopped as he heard screaming. Some people screaming in terror, some in pain, most of it coming from the general direction of the Three Broomsticks. It's happened, he thought. Hogsmeade is under

attack. "Come on!" he yelled. "We have to get to the nearest building, get some cover! We can't be out in the open like this!"

They started running; Harry couldn't recall ever running faster. As he ran, he saw bolts of what looked like lightning lance along the street, hitting one person, then another. People were yelling and running, and some were on the ground. Harry and the others had almost reached the nearest building when a man jumped out in front of Harry, barely fifteen feet away. Harry instantly Stunned him silently, as the others did with their voices, but the man managed to get off the words "Avada Kedavra!" before he was blasted back. The green bolt flew at Harry, who knew immediately that he was as good as dead. But just before the curse could reach him, Fawkes dove in front of him and, as he had for Dumbledore in the Department of Mysteries, swallowed the curse and burst into flames.

It took Harry a second to adjust to the fact that he was not dead, so sure had he been that it would happen. He reflexively looked around to check for further immediate danger, then bent down to check Fawkes, who looked much like a newly hatched chick. Harry quickly but gently picked him up and moved him to the building's outer wall, so he would be safer; it would be too risky to carry him, what with the lightning.

Harry turned around and saw the other three; Neville spoke, then the other two, looking utterly grim, nodded. Harry walked up to them. "We've got to get to the people doing the lightning. Let's go ahead, one building at a time. Neville, Ron, keep checking behind you to make sure no one sneaks up on us. Go!" They ran up to the next building, lining up against its wall, again taking cover.

Now that they were closer, they saw two people emitting the lightning, which Harry now saw looked more like lightning infused with fire. That could do a lot of damage, he quickly thought. He and Hermione leaped out and Stunned them both, sending them sprawling. "Dammit, where's that security?" he said aloud, in frustration. Hermione shushed him, pointing out two more people who had come from the sides of the nearest buildings and were walking calmly down the street.

"Hermione! Let's get them!" he whispered urgently, as Neville and Ron continued to check their backs.

"Are they the enemy?" she asked, worried. "They could be security!"

Harry shook his head. "If they were security, they'd be running, not walking. C'mon!" They ran over and took down these two just as lightning started pouring from their wands. They turned to see Ron and Neville silently Stun another, who had come up from behind them.

Harry shouted for them to advance to the next building; he could think of nothing to do but try to clean them out, one building at a time. They ran forward, and

reaching it, found Ernie Macmillan and Justin Finch-Fletchley already taking cover against the wall.

"Harry!" Justin whispered as they arrived. "What the hell is going on?"

A dozen voices screamed, this time, all in terror. "Look!" said Hermione.

They all looked up into the sky, and saw the Dark Mark, the symbol of an attack by Voldemort or those under his command. "There's your answer, Justin," Harry said quickly. "Voldemort. This is because of me." Saying it made him feel sick inside, but he made himself postpone any other concern but stopping Voldemort's minions.

He saw Hermione nod. "They already tried Avada Kedavra on Harry once," she told Ernie and Justin. "Fawkes dove and took it for him, but he can't do it again." Harry saw a look of dread cross Justin's face.

"Look, there's five over there, two buildings down!" Harry gestured to where lightning was being released, although there were few people remaining in the streets. "I assume everyone's ready with their shield." Five heads nodded. "Let's go get them, Ron and Neville, watch our sides." Harry in the lead, they ran out into the street.

The five Harry had indicated were fortunately not assiduous in watching their backs, and Harry's group took them down with little difficulty. Just as they did, two others who had better cover behind trees pointed their wands at the group, and lightning burst forth, directly at them.

"Protego!" shouted five voices; Harry again did his silently. The fire-imbued lightning bounced between the six harmlessly. Ron and Neville took out one of the latest two, while Ernie and Justin took the other. Harry looked down the street toward Hogwarts and saw Albus Dumbledore a hundred yards away, running in their direction, casting spells as he went. Thank God, it's almost over.

Sudden dread took him over as he heard the words "Avada Kedavra!" again, from behind him. Knowing that it was useless, he reflexively turned toward the sound of the voice, and saw the green bolt headed for him again, as if in slow motion. He knew he had no time to dodge. It had covered half the distance from the attacker to him when Harry suddenly heard a voice shout "Stupefy!" and a group of voices shout "Diffusio!" He filled with horror as he realized what was being done. He started to turn, to try to stop them, but it was too late. The last thing he saw was the bolt split into separate lines just a few inches in front of him.

Harry could not recall feeling so tired. He was not capable of any thought other than that he needed more sleep. He could not even manage to open his eyes, or

move at all. He was starting to wonder what had happened when he drifted off to sleep again.

Harry was aware of himself again, but barely, and still disoriented. He fought to awaken, but felt as though he were at the bottom of a pool, having to swim upward. It seemed as though something was blocking his return to consciousness. He drifted; for how long he did not know.

Finally, he felt himself coming to the surface, and was able to open his eyes, though not much. He recognized the infirmary, and that he was on one of its beds. He could not see the other beds, or anything but a figure near his bed with blond hair, looking across the room. He couldn't see her face, but he couldn't imagine who else it could be. "Pansy?" he tried to say, but his voice cracked, and it barely came out.

She whirled to face him. "Harry!" she shrieked, and bent down over him. He saw delight and vast relief in her eyes. "Oh, thank goodness, oh, Harry..." She held his face in her hands. "It's okay, Harry, you're going to be okay."

"What happened?" he managed to ask, still disoriented.

She looked suddenly concerned. "Hogsmeade, Harry..." It struck Harry like a metal ball in the stomach; it all came back to him.

"The others?" he asked, eyes wide and fearful, dreading what he might hear.

She looked dismayed. "They're still unconscious. They're not dead, don't worry. The fact that you came back means they still might. You got the least of it, you remember how the Diffusion Shield works."

"How long...?"

"A little over two days. It's just past midnight Tuesday, so early Wednesday morning. That reminds me." She took out her Galleon, pushed its edge at twelve o'clock, and pressed the center. "I took your Galleon and gave it to Ginny. She wanted me to call her as soon as you came around. We've been worried sick."

"How have you... are you out in the open?"

"No, Dumbledore and McGonagall have arranged it so I can stay overnight without being seen. Ginny's been here most of the days."

Harry tried to sit up, with marginal success. Pansy helped him to a sitting position, holding him in her arms. "But they're going to be okay?" he asked.

"They don't know, Harry. They think so, but they just don't know. This kind of thing has barely ever happened before, apparently. No one knows if four people have ever tried to Diffuse a Killing Curse before, so they just can't say. But like I said, your coming back makes it more likely that they will."

"Four?" Harry asked, surprised. "Hermione, Ron, Neville..." He trailed off.

"Justin," she said.

Justin? He was amazed. He wouldn't have thought it. Then suddenly he remembered the lightning, and asked another question to which he dreaded the answer. "Any dead?"

She grimaced, looking at him with profound sorrow. "Four," she said. She gave their names; he knew them all from his classes, but only from there. Two Ravenclaw third years, a Gryffindor third year, and a Hufflepuff fourth year. "All were in the Three Broomsticks. It was crowded, it was sudden."

Harry felt his world come crashing down around him. He knew that his life would never be the same again. Four people dead, because of you. Four people dead. His mind nearly shut down, nearly refused to accept it.

He managed to sit all the way up. "Four?" he could only repeat. She nodded, a tear rolling down her face. He felt staggered, not knowing what to do. Then the tears started coming, and he made no effort to stop them. He wailed and buried his head in her shoulder, crying harder than he ever had before. He couldn't have stopped it if he'd wanted to. He felt adrift in a sea of hopelessness, clinging to Pansy for dear life. There was nothing to do but cry, and he wondered if he could cry enough to get what was in him out.

He was barely aware of the passing of time. In a corner of his consciousness, he noticed that Ginny had come in, but he couldn't talk to her, couldn't do anything but continue to cry. Pansy held him tightly as she ran her hands over his head, across his back, desperate to somehow alleviate his suffering.

He finally stopped crying, as much from exhaustion and physical necessity as anything else. Pansy looked into his eyes, and he knew that she was wishing she could suffer this for him so he wouldn't have to. She kissed him on the forehead and got up so Ginny could sit down next to Harry. Ginny sat and held Harry tightly. "Oh, Harry, we're so happy you're okay."

"I wish I was," Harry said bitterly. "They should have left me alone. If anyone was going to die, it should have been me, not four innocent third and fourth years."

Ginny was trying to hold back her frustration with what he was saying, for his sake. "I've cried for them too. I think we all have. But we don't get to choose that kind of thing. All we can do is the best we can, and that's what you've always done. There's nothing that you've done that you should have done differently. You said we should use his name, and you were right. We can't fight Voldemort if we can't say his name. And if we don't fight him, we're dead, or worse. You did what you had to do."

Harry wanted to, but he couldn't deny the truth of what she was saying. "They didn't ask to take this kind of chance."

"No, they didn't," she agreed. "But innocents are killed in any war, it's a fact of life. Voldemort kills far more innocents than most. You can't blame yourself for

leading a fight where innocents are killed, or you can't lead any fights at all. You fight, you lead the fight because the cause is right, because it's necessary. Do you want to sit here and tell me we shouldn't be fighting Voldemort?" She stared at him.

He knew it was true, but somehow it was still of no comfort. He said nothing.

"I've been talking to people, Harry. No one blames you, at least no one I've talked to. All they want is for you and the others to get better, everyone's really concerned for you and them. People don't blame you. You shouldn't."

Harry still said nothing. "And don't even think about wishing you were dead," she said, finally letting some of her annoyance show. "Look at them. They were willing to give their lives for yours. I know that's not what you would have wanted, but it says something about you, not to mention about them. They thought it was more important that you lived. Do you want to tell them that what they did was for nothing, that they may have given their lives for something that wasn't important? Do you want to tell that to me, to Pansy? Because we would have joined the Diffusion if we could've. I know this isn't what you want to hear. I know you don't think much of your life right now. But we do. Look at what they did. Think about what it means they think of you."

"They planned it..." Harry almost didn't realize he was speaking out loud. He looked at Ginny. "After the first one, I was getting Fawkes to a safe place. I looked back and saw the three of them talking. They must have decided to do this if someone else sent a Killing Curse at me. They knew that Fawkes couldn't protect me again... oh, my God, that's why they told Justin and Ernie. Hermione told them about the first Curse, that Fawkes couldn't help anymore. She was letting them know what they were going to do, to let them join if they wanted, and Justin did."

She nodded. "By the way, Ernie's been in here a lot. He's really been in a state, crying a couple of times, he feels horrible."

"Because he's concerned about Justin?" Harry asked numbly.

She shook her head. "He's concerned, but that's not why he's crying. He's crying because he's angry at himself for not having joined the Diffusion. He Stunned the one who attacked you. He definitely saved your life by doing it. If he had joined the Diffusion, no one would have Stunned the attacker, and he would have just hit you with another Curse while you were on the ground unprotected. Ernie knows that, but he still feels terrible. Because he thinks it was only because of cowardice that he didn't join, and it makes him feel bad about the kind of person he is. He thinks that the fact that what he did helped save you too was just chance."

"Do you know how many people I've talked to who say that they would have joined the Diffusion if they could have? Quite a few, even first years. You aren't going to do anyone any good telling them that their sacrifice would have been for

nothing. We need you, Harry, and we need you to do something harder than die. We need you to live, even though others die. If you don't believe that it's important that you live, you can believe the people who are willing to die for you. It's the least you can do for them."

All true, Harry thought. It was still of little comfort. She could see that in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she continued. "I guess I can't imagine what you're going through. Dumbledore told us that you would feel this way, both feeling responsible for those who died, and wishing that you had died instead. He said it's called survivor's guilt. He's already talked with Ernie, I think it helped a bit. You just have to remember, none of this was your fault. It's Voldemort's fault, it's the fault of those who did it."

Pansy sat down on the chair and took Harry's hand. "You've made sure everyone's aware, Harry, that... Voldemort has to be fought." Even through his grief, it registered with him that this was the first time she had used the name, and that she was doing so to show she meant what she said. Noting his slightly raised eyebrows, she continued, "It's the least I can do. But it's true, Harry. There was nothing else to do but what you did."

Ginny nodded. "And if you blame yourself, then you have to blame Dumbledore. He already said that he's responsible, not you. It's his school, he says, and that makes him responsible for everything that happens. He encouraged you to do what you did, he knew the risks. Do you want to say that this is his fault? Because he's right, if it's your fault, then it's his too."

Harry had no answer for that, either. "It's not his fault," he said.

"That's right," Ginny agreed. "And that means it's not yours, either."

At once, Harry both knew she was right and couldn't accept it. The enormity of the four deaths washed over him again, and again he started to cry. Ginny took him into her arms and held him. He cried for another five minutes, then stayed limp in Ginny's embrace, exhausted.

Ginny looked at Pansy, who nodded, and got up to get something. Ginny gently laid Harry back down onto the bed. Pansy handed Harry a small glass of clear liquid, and pushed gently on his back from below to prop him up enough so he could drink it. He wasn't sure he wanted to, but they both looked very serious about it, so he acquiesced. He drank the liquid and lay back. He was mercifully asleep again within moments.

Harry awoke, and by the quality of the light, he could tell that it was morning. He felt weak still, but much better than he had last night. He looked up to see Professor Dumbledore sitting at his bedside. "How are you feeling, Harry?"

Harry looked into Dumbledore's concerned eyes, eyes which conveyed the impression that Dumbledore already knew the answer to this question, and to most questions he asked Harry. "Physically, not that bad. I could probably even get up, but I'm sure Madam Pomfrey would have a fit. Mentally... well, you probably know already."

"Ginny and Pansy have told me about your conversation last night. It sounds as though they covered the high points of what you needed to be reminded of," Dumbledore answered. "But having experienced it myself, I know that being reminded once, or even many times, does not make the feelings go away. I wish I could make your feelings go away, but as you know, I cannot. All I can do is remind you of what you know already."

Harry accepted this mutely. He had begun to somewhat accept that he should not obsessively blame himself for the deaths, but he knew that he could never separate himself from them, either.

"You are so young, Harry," Dumbledore said gravely. "Almost too young to bear this kind of burden. I would have seriously considered not allowing you to bear it at all were it not for the fact that you have borne all other burdens placed upon you so well, and that what you are doing is right. You must never forget that. Also, keep in mind that you are only doing it because I allowed you to, even encouraged you to. Do you not think that I knew what you would do when I made you Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher? I knew you would use Voldemort's name, and I knew that you would encourage the students to do so. I knew you would have far better success than I had had, and that it very well might provoke Voldemort to this kind of action. Your only... culpability in this is that you did what was right. I am ultimately responsible."

"You always say that," Harry said, almost annoyed.

"That is because while I am the headmaster of this school, it is always true," Dumbledore replied. "I cannot escape that. I do not mean to say that I have done anything wrong in allowing you to do as you have done, just that it was my decision.

"I would like to bring you up to speed on a few matters," he continued. "It may be useful for you to know what has happened while you have not been among us."

Harry nodded and sat up. "By the way, why weren't we taken to St. Mungo's?"

"Most of the wounded were, for treatment for burns. Do not worry, all will recover with no adverse long-term effects. But St. Mungo's was crowded enough as it was, and we understood that there was nothing they could do for you or your

friends. You would either wake up, or not. It was deemed best to leave you here. Madam Pomfrey has been spending most of her time at St. Mungo's."

"And I suppose we still don't know any more about them?" he asked, referring to his friends.

Dumbledore shook his head. "As was the case with you, we will only know when they wake up. While it is not certain that they will, it seems highly likely. I believe that if they were going to die, they would have done so immediately. All we can do is wait.

"Most of the damage was done immediately, in the Three Broomsticks. The nature of the spell used is to inflict the greatest possible damage over a specific, usually crowded, area. Some people in the establishment were fortunate not to be hit by the initial burst, and some reacted very quickly and escaped damage. The attackers were subdued almost immediately, but the damage was done.

"Once order was restored in Hogsmeade, emergency medical and security personnel evacuated all injured to St. Mungo's via the Owl Office fireplace or by Apparating. Five people were initially in critical condition, but have since recovered somewhat, and will continue to do so. I then returned to Hogwarts to inform the school of the details of what happened, including the status of the dead, injured, and that of you and your friends.

"Yesterday I met with the families of the deceased. They were in shock, of course, and extremely distraught. It may comfort you very little, but you should know that even in their grief, they do not blame you, or even me, for what happened. They understood that this is what Voldemort does, and that it is why he must be fought and defeated. I also visited the wounded at St. Mungo's. Even the more seriously wounded were very concerned about your situation, and many expressed the belief that you helped save their lives, as have a number of uninjured students here at the school. They credited your early and strong emphasis on the Protection Charm with their ability to either totally or partially block the damage. The fact is that considering what was done, and the age of the victims, four was an amazingly low number of fatalities. I had feared the number could be as high as a few dozen. The spell used by the attackers was chosen, as I said, because it is highly damaging.

"This morning, I spoke during breakfast and was able to inform the school of the recovery of many at St. Mungo's, and to tell them of your recovery. This news was greeted by what I would describe as a thunderous ovation. I have since been besieged with requests to see you; your Slytherin first years have been especially persistent."

For the first time since the deaths, Harry couldn't help but smile, if only a little. "I'll see them any time you want to send them in," he said.

"Of course, I will send them in later on. Also, much of the Weasley family is here; they wish to see you, as well as wait for Ron to recover. But there are other things we must discuss first."

The infirmary door opened, admitting Snape and McGonagall. McGonagall walked over to where Harry was sitting on his bed and took his hand for a moment. "You are all right, Harry?" she asked.

"Getting better," he replied.

She turned to Dumbledore. "Albus, are you sure this cannot wait until he is more fully recovered?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "He must know, Minerva, and the sooner the better. He must incorporate it into his grief, or he will grieve twice. I know it is a terrible burden, but it is unavoidable." He turned to Harry. "You said that you did not blame me for what happened in Hogsmeade, Harry. What I am about to tell you may cause you to change your mind."

Harry flinched internally. What could he possibly say to make me think that? thought Harry. He waited for Dumbledore to continue.

"The attack occurred at 3:45 p.m. on Sunday. On Sunday morning, Voldemort met with Professor Snape and told him of the planned attack, including the timing. He wished Professor Snape to find a way to keep me distracted when the attack started, so I could not come to your aid immediately when the attack began. Professor Snape was able to return to Hogwarts at just before 1:30 p.m., and he immediately informed me of Voldemort's plans. I told no one but Professor McGonagall. I took no action to prepare for or to prevent what happened."

Harry literally couldn't believe what Dumbledore was telling him. He was silent for a half a minute. Finally, he said, "You knew? You could have stopped it and you didn't?" With extreme sadness, Dumbledore nodded. Harry felt as though he could hardly breathe. "Why?" he managed to get out.

"Because, Harry, the information was too good to use. We had no choice but to assume that Professor Snape was the only way we could have gotten the information, and that Voldemort would know that. If we had done anything to prepare beyond the security precautions we had already taken, Voldemort would likely have deduced that Professor Snape was the source, and his cover would have been blown. We could not risk that."

Harry was astounded at what he was hearing; the flaw seemed so obvious. "So what?" he shouted, his grief coming out as anger. "Four people are dead! You said it could have been dozens! How could you possibly... let four people die..." The tears started coming, forcing him to stop talking, to control himself. He put his head in his hands. "I don't believe it," he muttered through tears.

Snape moved to the end of the bed and stared down at Harry, eyes flashing furiously. "And I do not believe, Potter, that you can be so selfish, so unthinking. All you know are your own emotions! You know what kind of man the headmaster is. If you would think for a few seconds, you would realize what this has cost him, what he has suffered, and you would not question his judgment until you have heard his reasons. If you love him as you profess, you would not place your feelings above his."

Harry had stopped crying, so startled was he by Snape's outburst, especially its emotional content. He would not have assumed that Snape could ever care about or consider such things. He was still trying to work through what Snape had said when Dumbledore spoke again.

"He is still young, Severus," said Dumbledore gently. "He could not have any reaction but this. I knew this. He is doing the best he can."

"Harry," said McGonagall, "the headmaster had no choice. He could make no other decision than the one he made. It was a horribly painful choice, but it was the only one."

His voice conveying that he desperately wanted to believe that was true, he asked Dumbledore, "Okay, then, please tell me. If you stopped the attack, Professor Snape gets blown, but he's still safe at Hogwarts. How is that worth four lives? Or dozens?"

"Whether I die is irrelevant, Potter," said Snape, still sounding angry. "What is relevant is what my death accomplishes. I am perfectly willing to die to bring about the death of the Dark Lord. Any other use would be a foolish waste of my utility."

Dumbledore nodded. "Harry, you may not fully understand Professor Snape's importance to us, to our cause. He is irreplaceable, a priceless asset, our only chance to ever have a spy who has Voldemort's confidence. His presence very greatly increases our eventual chance of victory against Voldemort."

"In this kind of situation, the larger picture must be considered, even when innocent lives are at stake. Consider what we are fighting for. Voldemort was progressing toward a likely victory fifteen years ago, until your mother's sacrifice stopped him. He could do so again now. Think of what it would mean if he were to gain unchallenged control over the wizarding world. It would be tyranny, the end of freedom. Muggles worldwide would be made slaves, tortured or given to dementors on the whims of Voldemort's servants. Thousands would certainly die, perhaps even millions, and life would be made a miserable hardship for those who did not subject themselves to his authority. You have seen him, you know what he is like. Imagine him as being in control of all wizards everywhere."

"This is what we are fighting for, Harry. These are the stakes. They are as high as such stakes can get. We must be prepared to make any sacrifice in order to

defeat Voldemort, or there will soon be nothing worth fighting for. Professor Snape is our best chance to accomplish that. We simply cannot consider losing such an asset unless it means a great likelihood of Voldemort's demise.

"In a case like this, as in all such cases, a decision must be made. Do we sacrifice four lives, or dozens, now, or do we keep an asset that we hope and expect will help us save thousands, not to mention our freedom? As Professor McGonagall said, agonizing though it was, there was no other choice to be made."

Harry was silent for a moment, the enormity of it sinking in. He knew intuitively that Dumbledore was right, he had to be. He simply hadn't thought through the massive implications of a Voldemort victory. He put his head in his hands again; it all seemed too much to think about. How could a person weigh four lives against such stakes? How to tell the victims' loved ones that it was worth it, what the victims had died to unknowingly protect? But he knew Dumbledore, and he knew he had to accept that what Dumbledore was saying was true. And that meant that Snape was right, that he had judged Dumbledore guilty of a terrible act without knowing the facts, and that Harry's judgment would have hurt Dumbledore, reminding Dumbledore only more of the terribly painful decision he had made. Impulsively he stood up, walked over to a wall, and kicked it. It hurt his foot, of course, but he didn't care. He banged the wall with his fist a few times. It didn't seem to do any good.

Dumbledore walked over to him, standing a few feet away from Harry as he leaned into the wall in despair. Harry looked over his shoulder and saw Dumbledore's eyes. He saw pain, not only Dumbledore's own pain for what he had to do, but his pain for what Harry was going through. Harry also saw Dumbledore's love, his forgiveness for how Harry had acted. Equally impulsively, Harry stepped toward Dumbledore and hugged him. Dumbledore hugged him back and patted his shoulder; for some reason that caused Harry to burst out in tears again, as if he didn't feel worthy of forgiveness. Through his sobs, Harry said, "I'm sorry, sir... Professor Snape was right, I wasn't thinking about you, what you had to go through..."

He continued crying as Dumbledore continued to comfort him. "As I said, you are young, Harry. This kind of burden is too much for many mature, grown men to bear. You have nothing to be ashamed of." Harry wasn't sure that was true, but he was glad to hear Dumbledore say it.

Harry cried for another minute, until this bout was out of his system. Harry stepped back, and took a tissue proffered by McGonagall. He blew his nose, then looked up at her. She had a proud yet sad look on her face, with no trace of her usual reserve. To his surprise, she stepped toward him and put her arms around him. He did

likewise. As she held him, she said, "It might make you feel better to know, Harry, that I have held Albus as he has wept for similar reasons, on many occasions."

Harry was surprised, but realized that he shouldn't have been, knowing Dumbledore's kindness and good heart as he did. "It does, a bit, actually," he said.

She looked at him kindly as she released him. "There are many men who would not weep, and it is sad for those who follow them."

He nodded his understanding. Dumbledore spoke again. "Harry, there is one more thing that is important that we do. I would like to ask you to place your recollections of Sunday afternoon into the Pensieve, so that we may go over them. Valuable information could be gained."

Harry agreed, and Dumbledore moved the Pensieve over. Harry used his wand to move his memories, then said, "This should start as we start back from the end of the main street." The four of them put their fingers into the Pensieve, and soon Harry was standing on that street, looking at himself talking to Hermione about buying butterbeer for the younger students.

Harry watched the events happen as if for the first time; he realized that the perspective was very different when one wasn't in the actual situation, even though the same events were being viewed. Harry saw Fawkes dive and swallow the first Killing Curse, and himself walk over and put Fawkes in a safer place. Dumbledore smiled at him and said, "It was not necessary, but it was a very thoughtful thing to do."

McGonagall said, "Harry, did you hear this conversation?" referring to Neville speaking to Ron and Hermione. Harry shook his head.

She motioned him over, and the scene was suddenly where it had been twenty seconds before. Standing near Neville, Harry heard him say, "Fawkes can't do that again, and that probably wasn't the only one looking for Harry. We have to be ready to Diffuse." He saw Ron and Hermione nod. The scene froze.

"Most impressive," said Dumbledore. "I had assumed that they had done it on the spur of the moment; I did not know they had planned it. It is quite an amazing thing, to plan to do something so risky."

"If I had heard, I would have told them not to do it," Harry said.

"And what do you think they would have done, Harry?" asked McGonagall.

Harry nodded. "Yes, I know, they would have done it anyway. By the way, I didn't hear them in the situation. How is it we can hear it now?"

"We hear and see many things that do not consciously register, because they are so faint," Dumbledore explained. "The Pensieve has the effect of enhancing such information."

The memory started again, and they watched it through to the end without further comment. They then left the Pensieve, and Harry put his memories back.

"I must say, Harry," said Dumbledore, "that I am impressed, not only with your friends' bravery, but your tactical instincts. You reacted quickly and decisively, taking charge and giving the proper instructions."

Harry nodded his acknowledgment. "I just wanted to get those people out of there."

"You and your group managed to take out quite a few of them," McGonagall added. "I'm sure the Aurors will be impressed when they see this."

"Speaking of the Aurors, where were they? I kept expecting security to charge in, and it didn't happen until the end. Surely they could have reacted faster than they did without compromising Professor Snape's information."

"The plan was multi-faceted, Professor," said Snape, "and I was only told that part which the Dark Lord decided that I needed to be told."

"At precisely 3:40, an attempt was made on the life of the British Prime Minister," explained Dumbledore. "It appears that a few Muggles were put under the Imperius Curse by Death Eaters to make the attempt. This caused some Aurors to be dispatched to the scene. Then at 3:43, Death Eaters launched an assault on the holding areas of those captured in June in the Department of Mysteries, freeing all those held. Aurors were again dispatched, but the Death Eaters managed to escape. An emergency call went out to all Aurors to attempt to track them down, which is why no one was able to be of help in Hogsmeade."

"So... but those weren't Death Eaters in Hogsmeade, were they?" Harry asked. "They weren't very smart, and they only used the one spell. Well, that and the ones that tried to get me."

"Yes, Harry, those were not Death Eaters, except the ones who tried to kill you. The ones who attacked were random wizards who were kidnapped from various countries from around the world, so there would not be a rash of disappearances in one area that would be more easily noticed. They were put under the Imperius Curse, taught that one spell, and sent out to cause mayhem. To Voldemort, they were what could be called disposable attackers, to be used only once. This is why they had no real tactical abilities. The ones sent to attack you, all three of whom are now in custody, are actual Death Eaters, apparently recent recruits. The Killing Curse is not easy to learn, so Voldemort sent them specifically to seek you out. You only saw two; the third was captured before he could take any action."

"Too bad they couldn't have just gotten me, and left the Three Broomsticks alone," said Harry. McGonagall gave him a reproachful look. "You wouldn't think that,

if it were you?" Harry challenged McGonagall. Her expression softened, and she did not answer.

"Killing you was only one objective, Harry. The other one was terror, hence the Dark Mark as you saw. He wants to be feared. This is an attempt to regain some of what he lost when you defeated him. In any case, it is very fortunate that they did not get you, not only for your own sake. You must understand your own importance. It is difficult to say who is more important to our cause, you or Professor Snape. You are both irreplaceable."

"If you had to choose one of us, Headmaster, it should be him," said Snape.

Harry was startled. "Last year in Occlumency," he said to Snape, "you said I was neither special nor important."

"That was before the fourth dream," replied Snape. Harry realized that Snape was referring to the spell that blocked the Cruciatus Curse.

"But that's not so important, in the scheme of things," responded Harry. "It's not the kind of thing that's going to help us defeat Voldemort."

"My feeling, Professor Potter, is that that is not the last surprising thing that you will do before this is over," said Snape. Harry looked at Dumbledore in surprise.

Dumbledore nodded. "That you came up with that spell, Harry, suggested to us that the prophecy meant more than was apparent at first. Our belief is that there is something as yet unknown about you that will be instrumental in bringing about Voldemort's defeat. We cannot, of course, guess what it might be. We must wait for events to play out. But that is why you are so important."

"I'm curious, sir... considering that... did Professor Snape have specific information that I would be a target?"

"No, Harry, he did not. But I understood that you probably would be one anyway."

"In that case... did you give any consideration to suggesting that I not go to Hogsmeade? Not even because of how you feel about me, but because I was so important that I couldn't be risked?"

Dumbledore nodded. "It is a good question, Harry. In fact, I gave it serious consideration. Of course, you were already in Hogsmeade when I got the information, but I could have attempted to call you back. I did not do so for two reasons. One, it might have given Professor Snape away; it is highly irregular for someone to be called back from Hogsmeade in such a fashion, and attention would have been called to it. Two, what would I have told you? That Hogsmeade would be under attack, and that you should stay safely in the castle? As much as I do not wish to risk your life, I wish to put you in that position even less. Can you imagine the agony you would have experienced, to have to wait for the attack, knowing it was coming, unable, at my

instruction, to come to the assistance of those under attack? I would not do that to you. I consoled myself with the knowledge that your skills are excellent, and not only would you likely survive, you would likely save others in the process. And you did survive, because of the loyalty you inspire. Justin is not even someone you are especially close to, and look what he did.

"It was painful not to call you back. I very much wanted to. But I could not allow my personal feelings to override my judgment. And my judgment was that while you were at risk, Professor Snape was at greater risk if I protected you."

"I understand, sir. I'm not bothered, believe me. I really was just curious."

"Professor Potter," said Snape, "if you would indulge me for a moment, I would like to test your grasp of the 'big picture.' If you were analyzing the current struggle, how would you rate Sunday's events? Which side comes out better, and why?"

Harry's first thought was that he didn't want to think about the big picture, that it was somehow a disservice to the memory of those who had died to weigh their deaths against other considerations. He knew that wasn't right, but he felt it anyway, and struggled to put such thoughts aside. "I keep thinking about those four people, but I know that if I'm going to be involved like this, I'm going to have to look at the big picture better." He thought for a minute. "How much effort is involved in kidnapping, training, and handling those people they used in Hogsmeade?"

The calculating look on Snape's face suggested to Harry that he was thinking along the right lines. "Not a small amount. This operation has clearly been the Dark Lord's main strategic objective since his confrontation with you."

"Then, the only good thing for them is that they got those Death Eaters back. From their point of view, the Hogsmeade operation has to be considered a failure. Not only did they fail to get me, losing three Death Eaters in the process, but the resources they put into gathering all those disposable attackers seems to say that they were hoping for a death toll much higher than four. They probably wanted dozens, like Professor Dumbledore was afraid would happen." He thought again. "Also, it seems to me that the time they spent doing this was time they could have spent doing something else, like gathering even more forces for long-term use. They took a gamble on this, and lost. So I guess I'd say that it's a big plus for our side."

Snape looked impressed, as did McGonagall and Dumbledore. "A good analysis, Professor. The last of what you said is the key. Are you familiar with the concept of opportunity cost?" Harry shook his head. "Opportunity cost," Snape continued, "refers to the fact that when one is doing something, one could be doing something else. If you have tickets for a performance, but choose to spend the evening with a friend instead, the opportunity cost of that visit is that you miss the performance."

This operation was costly to the Dark Lord in that sense; he has made very little progress in his strategic objectives in the past seven weeks. And it is highly likely that what he would have done in these seven weeks had he not been doing this would have cost more than four lives. So, in a real sense, almost certainly, lives were saved. And why exactly did he spend the last seven weeks doing this?"

Harry understood this was a rhetorical question, but he answered it anyway. "Because of my campaign to say his name."

"Correct," Snape said. "I said at that time that I would not have advised joining that particular fight. I was obviously incorrect. I could not have guessed-though, nor could you, I suspect-that you would so successfully galvanize the Hogwarts community, and begin to have an effect on the wizarding community in general. That he takes this seriously is reflected in his actions. By joining the fight with you, he has diverted time and resources from long-term strategic aims, so your campaign would be considered a success if only for that reason."

"The headmaster would probably give you this advice as well, but it is very important that you keep up your defiant posture in the public arena. You will have to answer the media's questions. You must emphasize strongly your determination to continue in your efforts. You must not even hint at any self-blame for the deaths, for if you did-"

"Voldemort would know he was getting to me, that making the body count higher is the way to beat me down," Harry finished as Snape nodded. "I understand."

"Needless to say, Harry," said Dumbledore, "you should not be any less than honest in your interview. Hugo would know if you were. I suppose it is more a matter of emphasis. Hugo will notice that, too, but he will also understand the reasons, and not press the issue."

"When will this interview be, sir?" Harry asked.

"It has not been determined yet, but I believe he would like to do it as soon as possible, so that his story will be closer to the actual event. I would say that you should do it when you feel ready. But in any case, I would recommend that you first see some of the people who wish to see you. They are most eager."

"Of course, sir. I want to see them too. You can go ahead and send them in now, if you want." After so much focus on death and strategy, Harry felt it would be nice to spend some time with people just for the sake of mutual support. McGonagall and Snape left, and a few minutes later, most of the remainder of the Weasley family came in: the parents, Bill, Fred, George, and of course Ginny. Mrs. Weasley gave him her usual hug and kiss; he surprised her by kissing her in return. Everyone expressed their relief that Harry had recovered, but of course it was tempered by concern for the others.

Dumbledore asked Harry to put his memories back in the Pensieve; he wanted the Weasleys to be able to see what happened for themselves. Harry did so, and they all went into the Pensieve to watch. After they were finished and came back out, there was no comment for a moment, just silence. Finally, George said, "Don't think I'll be making any jokes about Ron for awhile. That took some guts. I'm not sure I could have done that."

"It's almost more impressive that they planned to do it," agreed Fred. "Risking your life like that on the spur of the moment is one thing. But to choose to take a piece of Avada Kedavra..." He trailed off. "And Neville, being the one to suggest it. I remember when he was deathly afraid to ask someone to borrow a quill. He's come a long way."

Mrs. Weasley was tearing up. "I'm very proud of Ron," she said, "but I can't help realizing that I would've wished he hadn't done it if it was for anybody but Harry, or another member of the family. I know I shouldn't feel that way. Risking your life for someone is noble, no matter who it's for. But a mother can't help but feel like I do, I suppose."

"What's also amazing," Fred said, "is Justin. I was never aware that he was that close a friend of yours, Harry."

"He and Ernie were very supportive through the whole Voldemort thing, but otherwise... I was surprised too, to be honest. I have to imagine that he just thought it was the right thing to do. We've always been friendly, but never that close."

"Ernie feels terrible that he didn't do it too," Ginny said to Fred and George.

"Don't see why he would," said Fred as George nodded in agreement. "Risking your life for a friend even, is a stretch. To do it for someone you don't know all that well... no one should expect that of himself."

They walked over to Ron's bed and talked there. After a while, Harry was very surprised to see the door open and Pansy walk in. He wasn't concerned, though; he knew all the Weasleys could be trusted. Fred and George's expressions of surprise turned to shock when, smiling, Harry met her in the middle of the room and hugged her enthusiastically. He chuckled as he hugged her.

"What?" she whispered.

"Look at Fred and George," he whispered back, turning her around as part of the hug so she could see. He felt her suppress a laugh.

Ginny did actually laugh out loud. "See, guys, a few things have changed..."

"That'd be putting it mildly," said George. Ginny explained the Pansy situation to Fred and George; they asked her a few questions, then Pansy, and shook their heads in amazement.

"Oh, Harry," said Pansy, "I wanted to mention that the first years really want to see you. Well, actually, more like pleading, begging, demanding, that sort of thing."

"Harry has kind of a special relationship with his Slytherin first years," explained Ginny.

"Do you mind if they come in? They don't have to stay for long," Harry assured them. The Weasleys said it was fine, and a few minutes later, ten Slytherins ran into the room. Augustina Delva ran up to him and hugged him tightly. "Oh, Professor, we were so worried..." As soon as she let go, the other girls all took their turn, and he returned their hugs gratefully.

George couldn't help saying, "Funny, I don't seem to remember student-teacher relations being quite so good when we were here."

Harry chuckled. "We have an unusually good group of first years," he said.

"No, he's an unusually good teacher," Helen contradicted him. "And he drove off Voldemort. How many teachers can say that?"

The Weasleys reacted with surprise; they were barely used to saying the name themselves, never mind hearing an eleven-year-old say it so unselfconsciously.

"Thank you, Helen," Harry said. "That's nice of you."

"Well, it's true!" said another girl indignantly. There were many sounds of agreement. The Weasleys smiled.

Harry said, "You guys, I want you to meet some friends of mine... well, they're more like family, really. The Weasleys, Ron and Ginny's family. Arthur, Molly, Bill, Fred, and George."

David Septus gaped. "You're Fred and George?" he asked excitedly.

"The fireworks, and the swamp?" chimed in Augustina.

"You two are famous!" enthused Hedrick. "We heard all about what you did last year, it was so brilliant..."

Mrs. Weasley looked unhappy as Fred and George grinned broadly. "Well, no doubt the tales are exaggerated..." Fred said with obvious false modesty.

"But it is nice to know that we have left a legacy," added George.

"Pansy," Harry said, "I just showed the Weasleys what happened in Hogsmeade, in the Pensieve. I can show you and the first years, if you'd like." Harry had to explain to them how the Pensieve worked. The first years were very excited to be able to see Harry's memories of what had happened. They gathered around the Pensieve, all twelve of them barely fitting, and put their fingers in. They emerged a few minutes later, all except Harry with very impressed looks.

"Wow..." said Helen. "I mean, hearing about it is one thing, but seeing it is different. I remember," she continued, now speaking more to the Weasley parents, "in the first week, I asked Ron how he could do stuff that was so dangerous, and he

said the thing was not to think about it. He had to think about this, but he did it anyway. That was really brave, what he did, what they did. But you didn't want them to do it, did you," she asked Harry. "At the end, I could tell. You were scared for them."

Harry nodded. "No, I didn't want them to. They could have died. They still might."

"But we would have done it," protested Hedrick. "We would have wanted to, anyway. If we were brave enough." Others voiced agreement.

"I know you would," said Harry, wanting to honor their desire to help rather than chastise them. "But you have to understand... my parents died saving me. A very close friend died in June, helping to keep me safe. It makes me feel like I don't want more people dying for me, enough already have. It's hard when people you care about risk themselves for you."

Arthur Weasley stepped forward and looked at Harry seriously. "I can imagine what you must feel, Harry. But you inspire this kind of loyalty. I can see it's a burden as well as a gift. But you're important, and you're going to have to get used to the fact that people want to do this for you. You don't honor them by disapproving of what they do."

Harry looked a bit ashamed. "I see what you mean, Mr. Weasley. I'll try."

"Harry... please call me Arthur." Harry raised his eyebrows a little, and nodded.

The Slytherin first years lingered for another fifteen minutes, talking to various Weasleys, and Pansy talked to Fred and George for a while, then Bill. Finally, Pansy decided that the first years had stayed long enough, and suggested they go. They left, followed by Pansy.

Molly watched them go, a smile on her face. "I've never seen students like that before," she said, impressed. "They really love you, Harry."

"I love them, too," he said earnestly. "They're really great."

"I knew you'd be a successful teacher," she said. "But even I didn't imagine this would happen, that you would be thought of this way. I'm sure that no Hogwarts teacher has ever been this... beloved, even Professor Dumbledore."

Bill agreed. "They couldn't wait to tell me about how much they loved your class. They wish they could have it every day. It's nice for them that they have a teacher they feel that way about. Bet you don't have absenteeism problems."

Harry admitted that some rather ill students had tried to attend his class anyway. The Weasleys were impressed, but not surprised. "I sure hope your example doesn't spread, Harry," said Fred. "We'd never sell another Snackbox again."

"Thank goodness for Binns, Trelawney, and Snape," agreed George.

"Speaking of which," Harry pointed out, "Binns'll never notice, but Snape and anyone else who's on the ball is starting to recognize the Snackbox symptoms. You're going to have to come up with new ones, even Professor Dumbledore mentioned that."

"Yes, he told us, too," said George. "We're working on it right now, in fact."

"Our newest idea is a Diarrhea Dumpling," said Fred, smiling. The Weasleys and Harry laughed, except for Molly, who made a face. "That's disgusting," she said, as the others laughed more.

The Weasleys stayed for another half hour. They would have liked to stay longer, but they knew it could be a while before Ron woke, and as a practical matter they couldn't stay indefinitely. Before she left, Molly visited every bed, kissing the forehead of each person, and lastly, Harry's. The Weasleys filed out, except Ginny, who stayed behind with Harry. They sat down together on Harry's bed.

"I see you're doing better today," she said.

"You and Pansy really helped," he said. "You kept me from wallowing in my own misery any more than I had to. And I really would have wallowed, I know it."

"That's what friends are for, Harry. Now you should probably get some food, you must be starved. I know you haven't left here yet."

Harry had to admit he was hungry. He asked her to come with him, but she wasn't willing to leave the infirmary, on the chance that someone else might awaken. "There should be someone here all the time," Ginny said. "Probably Madam Pomfrey will be back later today, and be able to look after them. But you should go, get some food, talk to a few people. They'll be stopping you in the halls anyway."

"What about classes?" Harry asked. It hadn't occurred to him that he had already missed three days' worth of classes.

"Oh, you didn't know? On Sunday evening, Professor Dumbledore announced that because of what happened, there would be no classes this week. There's going to be an extra week at the end of the year to compensate. It's not as though people would be able to concentrate very well on their schoolwork."

Harry could see the point of that. He left the infirmary and headed to the kitchens, where he was greeted enthusiastically by the house-elves, not only Dobby. He ate his food in the nearly empty Great Hall, then headed back to Gryffindor Tower, where he was mobbed when he climbed in the portrait hole. He patiently spent a half hour answering people's questions and talking about what happened, and expressed his condolences to the third years, who had lost a friend.

He showered, changed, and got a few things from his dormitory before heading back to the infirmary. Ginny was still there, along with a group of Hufflepuffs visiting Justin. Harry greeted them and talked to them for a while, expressing his gratitude for what Justin had done. "In some ways, he reminds me a lot of Cedric," Harry told

them. "This was the kind of thing Cedric would have done, I'm sure of it." They thanked Harry, knowing what a compliment it was.

After they left, Ginny sat in a chair between Ron and Neville's beds, and Harry pulled up a chair next to her. She took his hand, and they sat in silence, waiting.

Madam Pomfrey returned on Thursday afternoon and greeted Harry warmly, but told him his presence was no longer required. He informed her that he would stay until all of his friends had awakened; his tone suggested that his removal would only be achieved by force. She gave him a look, but understood why he was being that way, and muttered something about him having special dispensation due to the fact that he was a teacher.

Sitting next to Ginny, Harry realized that Ernie had not been in since he had awoken. He pulled out his new Hogwarts map, and got a speeded-up display of Ernie's whereabouts. He had spent a lot of time in his dormitory, but almost none in the Hufflepuff common room. Most time not spent in his dormitory, Harry saw, had been spent under a tree, the same one Harry had sat under as he grieved for Sirius in June. He wondered if that tree was somehow a magnet for the grief-stricken.

"You should go talk to him," said Ginny, seeing what Harry was doing. "It may be that only you can forgive him, or help him to forgive himself."

"I was going to go do that," Harry confirmed. "He obviously doesn't want to come here because he'll have to face me." He folded up the map and headed out of the infirmary, and out of the castle.

It was a cold, dry, and cloudy day, not the ideal day for sitting around outside. Ernie was one of the very few outside the castle. Harry headed over to the tree; Ernie didn't see Harry until Harry sat down next to him.

"Hi, Ernie," Harry said. Ernie nodded but didn't say anything; Harry could tell he was embarrassed and didn't know what to say.

"I see you've become rather attached to this tree," Harry tried again.

Ernie looked surprised. "How did you-oh, the map. You're supposed to be looking for Slytherins with that, not me," he said, annoyed.

Harry decided the direct approach was better; Ernie didn't seem to be in a mood to take hints. "I think it's also reasonable to use it to check up on people we're concerned about."

Ernie looked at him as if trying to figure out what Harry was thinking. Finally he said, "Don't see why you should be. I wasn't all that concerned about what happened to you."

"Just because you didn't decide, on less than a second's notice, that you were willing to die for me?" Harry asked, trying to keep the incredulity out of his voice. "You're holding yourself up to an impossibly high standard, Ernie."

"It wasn't impossible for them," Ernie replied. Harry realized that Ernie wasn't about to let himself off the hook so easily.

"Yes, but Ron, Neville, and Hermione are my closest friends. I'm friendly with you and Justin, and I've always appreciated your support, but this is something I couldn't possibly have expected of you. You shouldn't expect it of yourself."

"Justin did it."

"That doesn't mean anything about you, though," Harry said. "It's a huge decision to make, it's not easy. Maybe on a different day you'd have made a different decision, or Justin would've. You can't possibly say. What we choose to do in any instant doesn't define who we are. Besides, I'm pretty sure Justin decided in advance to do it; I think he figured out from what Hermione said what they were going to do, and you didn't. That's not something you can blame yourself for. Maybe he wouldn't have done it with only a second's notice, or maybe you would've if you'd realized what was going on. You can't know."

Ernie turned to face him, in anguish. "I know enough. I know even thinking back on it, wishing I'd done it differently... if I had it to do over, I might still do the same thing. I don't think you can understand this, Harry. You're brave, everyone knows it. You'd have done it for me, I know. Who I was on Sunday is not who I want to be, but I'm afraid it's who I am."

"You can still be that, Ernie, though I'm not convinced you're not already. Again, we're talking about a split-second decision. You just can't beat yourself up over that. And it's a huge thing. It's like deciding you'll never be a good athlete because you didn't high-jump seven feet on your first try. Hermione, Ron, and Neville had all been in life-threatening situations before, had all done things they knew might mean their death. They knew what it was about. As for Justin, maybe he's just exceptional, I don't know. But it just isn't a fair standard to hold yourself to. I should know, I've held myself to a lot of unfair standards lately."

"What do you mean?" asked Ernie.

"I blamed myself for the four deaths," Harry said. "If I hadn't started the crusade, those people would be alive right now."

"Yes, but you were doing the right thing, and you know it," Ernie said. "There's nothing else to do but fight him. You said it, and you were right."

Harry nodded. "I know. But it seems different when there are consequences like this. Sometimes we can't help but feel things that we kind of know aren't right, like you are right now. Ernie, when I woke up and found out about the four who died...

I was absolutely convinced it was all my fault. I wished I were dead instead of them. I cried for a long time. I think part of me knew that I shouldn't feel that way, and a part of you knows you shouldn't be as hard on yourself as you're being."

"But you did the right thing, Harry-"

"I put people's lives at risk!" Harry said, almost angrily. "People who didn't choose to be at risk. I did that. I'm not saying it's wrong. I'm saying it's understandable that I would react like I did, but I also had to wake up and realize that that's just part of life, especially in a situation like this, where Voldemort could kill anyone at any time. And you have to realize that an action taken in one split second doesn't say everything there is to say about you. It's just too much, Ernie. I can't walk around blaming myself for their deaths. You can't walk around blaming yourself for this. It's not fair to yourself, and it's not fair to those around you."

"Nobody's been talking to me much lately," Ernie said.

Harry took out the map and waved it a bit. "You've been mainly here and in the dormitory, Ernie. You haven't given people much chance to talk to you, and your attitude doesn't welcome it, either. You've got to give people a chance. I think they'll react differently than you expect. One thing I know for sure, the four people in the infirmary won't blame you. And I don't, either." Harry fixed his gaze on Ernie, silently pleading for him to give himself a break.

Ernie stared back for a moment. Finally he asked, "Why do you care, Harry? I chickened out when I could have helped save your life. You could be up there basking in the adulation of the school. Why come out here?"

Harry couldn't help but let out a dry chuckle. "The last thing I feel like doing right now, Ernie, is basking in anyone's adulation. It's hard enough not to wallow in my own misery. But to answer your question, two reasons. One, I know what it feels like to blame yourself for something you shouldn't; I've done it a lot lately. And two, you made an effort to be supportive of me when I really needed it."

They sat in silence for a few minutes; Harry could tell Ernie was trying to accept what he was saying, but having a hard time. Harry realized he had probably convinced Ernie, and it would just take time for it to sink in. Harry stood up. "C'mon, Ernie. Let's go to the infirmary, wait on the others some more." He held out his hand to help Ernie up. Ernie just stared for a moment; Harry stared back and kept his hand out. Finally Ernie took it, and Harry helped him up. They walked back to the castle together.

Ernie stayed with Harry and Ginny for a few hours before heading back to the Hufflepuff common room, where, Harry noted with satisfaction while looking at his Hogwarts map, he stayed for another two hours, near a number of other people.

Pansy joined them at 10:00, and the three sat together and talked for over an hour. Eventually, Harry said, "Pansy, what do the Slytherins think you're doing when you're out of your dormitory so much? Your dormitory-mates must be noticing something."

"I assume they think it's something to do with the unusual situation we have here," Pansy said. "They don't ask." After a short silence, she continued, "I don't have much of a relationship with them, anyway, so they're not going to ask many questions. I mean, we're polite to each other, but they sort of have their own group, which I'm outside of. I think it's because at some point I started spending a lot of time with Malfoy, and my being one of his toadies probably disgusted them. It disgusts me, too, now, of course. It's probably too late to build any real relationship with them now, which is sad."

"I don't think it's too late," Harry said. "Look at the relationship you've built with me, and it hasn't been that long."

"Yeah," agreed Ginny. "I'm comfortable with you, and that's only from spending parts of four days together. Once they find out you've been working against Malfoy, they'll probably be open to the idea of being more friendly with you."

Appreciatively, Pansy said, "That's nice of you, both of you. Maybe you're right. We'll see."

"How do your dormitory-mates regard Malfoy?" Ginny wondered.

"We haven't talked about it that much, since they think I'm practically his girlfriend," Pansy said, her face expressing her disgust at the notion. I think that they see him pretty much for what he is, which is why they don't think much of me. They mostly try to avoid dealing with him. Wish I could do that. "

Harry interjected, "You could-"

"Don't you start with that," Pansy warned him, with a finger pointed at him for emphasis.

Harry blinked. "You don't even know what I was going to say!"

"You were going to say that I could come out in the open, and I wouldn't have to deal with Malfoy anymore, I'd be safe, and I could have a relationship with whoever I wanted."

Harry's eyebrows went up a little. "Well, okay, then you did know what I was going to say," he conceded. Ginny giggled.

"As if he hasn't told me that a half dozen times," Pansy said to Ginny. "He'll make a good father someday, always worrying."

"I thought mothers were supposed to be the ones that worried," Harry said.

"Well, it didn't seem right to suggest that you'd make a good mother someday," Pansy said reasonably. Ginny giggled again.

"Guess not," Harry agreed. "By the way, you should really try to get out quick if it looks like Neville or Justin is waking up, since they don't know about you."

"Or, we could decide that if Neville and Justin are willing to risk their lives for you, then they can be trusted to keep their mouths shut," said Pansy. "You trust them, don't you?"

"Of course I trust them," said Harry, annoyed. "You know what I'm talking about, and this isn't just me worrying stupidly. The more people know, the more risk there is. They don't need to know."

"It's so nice that you two are at the stage of your relationship where you bicker so much," Ginny said. Harry and Pansy both laughed.

"Ron and Hermione have been at that stage for several years now," Harry muttered.

"They bicker a lot?" Pansy asked. Harry and Ginny chuckled.

"All the time, it seems like," Harry said. "It's not so bad this year, but usually, yes. It's almost amazing that they're friends, they have such different personalities."

"Anyway," said Pansy, "I'm sorry, Harry, but I'm not going to go tearing out of the room just because the wrong person wakes up. If I'm here when it happens, then that's the way it is. I mean, suppose it's Neville, who's he going to tell?"

"He wouldn't tell anybody," Harry said. "It's just the principle."

"I have to say, I was really impressed with what he did in Hogsmeade, since I got to see it for myself," said Pansy. "He used to be so shy, it's amazing how he's changed. Do you know what caused it?"

"His grandmother thinks that being in the D.A. had a lot to do with it," Harry said.

The voice was so weak, Harry could barely hear it. "She's right," Neville said.

Harry, Ginny, and Pansy looked at each other for a second, then stood up and ran to Neville's bedside. "Neville?" asked Harry. Neville looked up at him and nodded. Harry made a triumphant fist and exulted, "Yes!" Ginny leaned over and kissed Neville on the cheek.

"Neville, we've been really worried about you, about all of you," said Harry. "You're the first to wake up."

"So, I guess it worked, then?" Neville asked.

Harry nodded, and had to remember not to chastise Neville or the rest for what they'd done. "Thank you, Neville. I'm alive because of you."

Neville smiled. "I'm glad." He paused, looking around. "What's she doing here?" he asked, referring to Pansy, who just smiled.

"She's been helping me since early September. She's been spying on Malfoy for me, and she saved me from long exposure to Malfoy's Confundus Beam during the Slytherin match. Dumbledore put up the magic-detection field because of her warning. And she's become a good friend of mine. Sorry I didn't tell you, but-"

"I didn't need to know," Neville finished. "I heard that part. Of course I won't tell anybody."

"I know. Anyway, she's here to be nice, to help keep me company. She and Ginny are about the only friends I have now who haven't been unconscious for four days."

"Four days?" asked Neville in amazement. "Wow, I had no idea. How are the other two doing? You said I was the first one awake?"

"Other three, Neville, and yes. Justin joined the Diffusion."

"Justin? Wow, I wouldn't have expected that," said Neville.

"I don't think any of us did, Neville. Just one of life's little surprises. By the way, I notice that you didn't mention to me what you were going to do."

Neville nodded. "There was no time to argue, so I thought it was better to skip that part."

"I'll have to remember that," said Pansy wryly. "Sounds like a good timesaver."

Neville slowly sat up, Ginny and Harry helping him. He stared at Pansy for a few seconds, then caught himself. "Sorry," he said to her. "I'm just not used to seeing you, in this kind of situation. I keep thinking you're going to make fun of us or something."

Her expression changed from happy to ashamed in a flash. "I understand," she said. "I have a lot to make up for."

Neville's face fell as he saw her reaction. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I don't know what's been going on... I'm sorry."

"No, you have every right to say that," she assured him. "This is all very new to you. That's been your only experience with me."

"Well," Neville said, "If Harry says you're his good friend, then that's good enough for me. So, what's happened since I've been out? Oh, right, Hogsmeade. What ended up happening in the attack?"

Harry grew somber. "Four dead," he said. He gave the names.

Neville shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry, Harry. I know you must feel responsible, but you really aren't."

Harry nodded. "So everyone's been telling me. But thank you anyway. Not much else going on besides that. The week's classes were canceled."

As Harry was speaking, he thought he saw the smallest movement from Hermione. He rushed over to her bed and took her hand. "Hermione? Are you awake?"

he asked. She blinked twice and looked up at him. He smiled in delight, causing her to smile back. "It worked," she said. He nodded. Pansy and Ginny walked over, smiling.

She looked at him happily. "I suppose you're going to be mad at us," she said.

He shook his head. "I'm trying to deal with it. You guys saved my life, and I'm extremely grateful." He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

She blushed a little. "I bet Neville didn't get one of those."

Harry smiled. "No, but I'm saving one for Ron when he wakes up." They all laughed, including Neville. "I'd pay to see that," Hermione said.

Ginny and Pansy both touched Hermione's arm. "We're so glad you're back," said Ginny. Pansy just smiled. The room soon became somber again after Hermione asked about the toll from Hogsmeade, and Ginny told her. She looked at Harry with great pity, knowing what he must have gone through.

"It's really horrible, Harry, but honestly... we must have taken down ten or fifteen of those people, and there had to be more. I expected the number to be higher than four, much higher."

"That's what Dumbledore said, too," said Harry. "It's not much consolation, but it's a little."

They all talked for another hour, and finally they went to sleep, Ginny back to Gryffindor Tower. Pansy wanted to stay in case anyone else woke up, but was evicted by Madam Pomfrey, who assured her that she would watch during the night.

Harry awoke in his infirmary bed to see Ron and Justin standing next to their beds, talking. He leaped out of bed, grinning, ran to Ron, and hugged him before Ron could react. To Harry's surprise, Ron exhibited no discomfort, and returned the hug. To Harry's reaction, Ron said, "Well, we did save your life, so it doesn't seem like a hug is too far out of line."

"Hermione would be proud, Ron," Harry said. He looked around to see where she was, and found her next to Neville's bed, talking to him. She glanced at Harry and smiled.

Harry walked over to Justin, who now knew what to expect. Justin smiled as Harry hugged him. "Thank you, Justin," Harry said. "That was a lot you did. I appreciate it, more than I can say."

Justin nodded. "Just seemed like the thing to do. They were obviously out to get you, and that was all we could do. Hermione, when you told us about Fawkes, I assume you were referring to what eventually happened?"

She walked over and nodded. "I couldn't say anything directly, because Harry would've had a fit, and we didn't have time for that. Also, it's not the kind of thing you want to ask directly, because it's really a lot. I just wanted to give you the chance in case you wanted to do it, but not make you feel like you should."

"I think you got it just about right. I got the impression from Ernie's face that he didn't get what you were talking about, which was fine. I figured we'd need one guy to take down the attacker, and that could be him." Justin saw the expression on Harry's face, and took a guess. "Don't tell me, he's been down on himself about it."

"Yes, he has," Harry confirmed. "I've talked to him about it, Dumbledore has, Ginny has... I think he's just starting to get through it. One more dose of 'don't worry about it' from you should finish it off, I hope."

Dismayed, Justin said, "Damn him... he would be like this, he always has these impossible expectations of himself. You should have heard him moan about missing an Outstanding O.W.L. in Astronomy. You'd have thought the world was ending."

Harry looked at Hermione, failing to keep a grin off his face. She gave him an annoyed look and said, "All right, go ahead..."

With as straight a face as he could manage, Harry said, "Justin, I can't imagine what that must have been like."

Justin chuckled. "Oh, yeah, I forgot... sorry, Hermione. You two'll be a great Head Boy and Girl next year. Anyway-"

Ron laughed out loud. "Does everyone think that?" Hermione asked.

"I think so," answered Justin. "Ernie says he thinks Harry'll get it. After this year, I'd say he was right, except Harry'll still be a teacher. I don't think they'd give it to you, Harry, not that you care. I think Ernie's just trying not to get his hopes up. Anyway, yeah, thanks for the warning, Harry. I'll harp on him about it, and he'll get over it."

Harry walked over to Neville and hugged him, saying, "Anyone who stays with me for five nights and loses sleep while I deal with Voldemort, or saves my life, gets a hug. So that's two for you this year, Neville."

Neville grinned and patted Harry on the shoulder. "Let's hope it stays at two for the year. You've had enough excitement."

"You should know by now, Neville. I'm Harry Potter. Excitement follows me around, and leaps out at me when I least expect it." Harry approached Hermione. "And you," he said, looking into her eyes, "you who so brazenly defy my wishes by saving my life while putting yours at risk..." She melted and hugged him. "I couldn't want a better friend," he whispered in her ear. "Thank you so much."

"You're very welcome. I'm just glad you're not mad," she teased him.

"Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but I feel like I haven't eaten for a few days, so what do you say we all go down for breakfast," suggested Ron. They did, leaving the infirmary empty for the first time in days.

It was Sunday afternoon, and the Gryffindor Quidditch team was walking off the pitch after an impromptu practice; there had been little to do all week, and Ron had now sufficiently recovered to practice. It had gone well, though Harry had found himself, while searching for the Snitch, reflecting on what Hermione had said about the Snitch being far too important a part of the game, and it made sense to him. He decided not to bring it up with Ron, though. He didn't know if Ron's attitude towards Hermione about the topic last week had been genuine or for the sake of being contrary, but he didn't feel like finding out.

"Well, that was a pretty good practice," Ron said. "Of course, it was a pretty good match we had last week. Ginny, Katie, I assume that next time you're going to score some goals yourselves?"

"I don't know, it worked pretty well last time," said Katie facetiously. "Besides, he's the new guy, why not make him do all the work?"

"Yeah, if it isn't broken, don't fix it," agreed Ginny. Dennis chuckled.

"Well, I'm glad that's taken care of," said Ron sarcastically. "At least next time we play Hufflepuff, and if you can count on them for one thing, it's that they'll play fair. That'll be especially welcome." Several teammates grunted their agreement.

"That's for sure," agreed Harry. "If I had to play Malfoy again, I'd probably fly around encased in my new spell's shield."

"Good idea, Harry," said Ginny. "Of course, then, considering what the shield's made of, you'd start being called the Seeker of Love." The rest of the team laughed at the play on words, even Harry.

"Just so long as I'm not known as the Seeker of Girlfriends," Harry joked, to more laughter, as Harry noticed a lone figure approaching them.

"Ah, I see my legacy still haunts you, Harry," smiled Hugo Brantell, offering his hand, which Harry shook. "If I hadn't asked you that question..."

"You'd have deprived my friends and well-wishers of hours of fun at my expense, so you must be very proud. How are you doing?"

"Good, Harry, good. Better than you, though that's not too difficult these days. I was wondering if I could get that interview anytime soon." He looked at Ron. "You, too, Ron. I want all five of you, if it's all right."

Ron appeared to consider it. "I don't know, Hugo, I get enough publicity as it is. Why don't you talk to just Harry instead?" The team laughed as Harry whacked Ron lightly on the arm.

"I'll take that as a yes," Hugo said. "Is right now okay? I've already gathered the others, they're at the castle entrance. We can do it in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom." Harry and Ron agreed, so they walked with Hugo up to the

entrance, where they met Neville, Hermione, and Justin, and headed to the classroom.

They sat down in a circle of student desks. Hugo said, "First of all, I should tell you that Professor Dumbledore has shown me Harry's memory of the events of last Sunday, so I don't need to ask any particular questions about that. Now, can everyone tell me what they were doing throughout the day? I may or may not use it, but it could be interesting background." It didn't take long to tell him; as the four Gryffindors had spent the day together, there were only two accounts.

"Harry, why were you going to buy butterbeer for the first and second years?"

Harry had almost forgotten that he'd planned to do that; he recalled that it was in the memory that Hugo had seen. He explained that those students couldn't go to Hogsmeade. "Now, it's hard to say if or when I'll be able to do that," Harry finished.

"Yes, I can see that," agreed Hugo. "Neville, after the first attack on Harry, you brought up the idea of using the Diffusion Shield to Ron and Hermione. What made you think of it?"

Neville looked nervous; this was his first time being interviewed as one of the people featured in an article. "I'm not sure... I was just thinking about what, if anything, could be done to protect Harry if it happened again. It especially had to be something that didn't require his cooperation. For example, I thought of having us move as a group with Harry at the center so he'd always be shielded by one of us. But somehow I didn't think he'd agree with the idea."

"Why would you think that, Neville?" asked Ron, deadpan.

"Just a feeling, Ron. Anyway, the Diffusion Shield just came into my head, and it was as good as it was going to get, the obvious choice. It had a chance of working, and Harry didn't have to know we were going to do it, or cooperate in any way."

"But it had the drawback of possibly killing you all if it didn't work," Hugo pointed out.

"Well, I didn't say it was perfect," Neville said, as the others chuckled. "I knew that could happen. But there was nothing else to do. We couldn't just stand by and watch it happen."

Hugo looked at Harry. "From what I saw in the Pensieve, Harry, it seemed as though you would just as soon they hadn't done it."

Harry sighed. "I'm extremely grateful for what they did, but yes, if I could have stopped them from doing it, I would have. They all could have been killed. You know already that I have no problem accepting risk, but great problems delegating it to others, especially on my behalf. My friends, knowing this about me, naturally went behind my back."

"It was the only thing to do, really," said Ron.

"There was no time for an argument," said Hermione.

"Ron, Hermione, you didn't hesitate at all when Neville suggested the idea? I mean, you knew the risks were substantial, it couldn't have been a trivial decision," pointed out Hugo.

"Of course it wasn't trivial, but at the same time, it was just obvious that it had to be done," said Ron. "Kind of like Harry with Voldemort in September, he just felt he had no choice. This was like that. Like Neville said, we couldn't just let him be killed. I didn't hesitate, and I know Hermione didn't, either."

"It's almost like faith," added Hermione. "You just know it, you don't question it. But it wouldn't have only been that way for Harry; we would have done it no matter which of us was the target. Maybe one day we'll get killed doing it, I don't know. But Harry's in this thing deep, and we're in it with him. So, no, there was no hesitation. You just know what you have to do, and you do it. You worry about the rest later."

"I've talked to some people," said Hugo, "and nobody is that surprised that you, Ron, and Neville did this for Harry. Well, they're kind of surprised at Neville. I keep hearing the phrase 'he used to be so shy.' But people are very surprised that Justin did it too."

"So was I," Ron said. Neville nodded in agreement.

"So, Justin, I see by your expression that you've already been asked this more than a dozen times in the past few days. So you must have a good answer by now."

"Well, I have the same answer, anyway, which is, 'it seemed like the thing to do,' which most people seem to accept," Justin said. "Obviously it wasn't a no-brainer for me like it was for the others. They've put their lives at risk for Harry before, it's a decision they'd already made. I hadn't, so I had to decide, and I didn't have that much time to do it. I didn't feel pressured, though. I knew nobody would think any less of me if I didn't."

"As everyone has pointed out, I'm not that close with Harry. We like each other, we're friendly, I support him, and I root for him in Quidditch when he's not playing Hufflepuff." The others chuckled. "So it's not like the others, who feel a strong personal closeness to Harry. In my case it's..." He stopped to think for a minute.

"I think it's two things. One thing is that he's taken on such a prominent role in the fight against Voldemort; by helping him, you're helping fight Voldemort, and that's what we all should be doing. But the main thing is what he did against Voldemort in September. Not the new spell exactly, but the awesome bravery he showed in being willing to face Voldemort and the Curse night after night. You can't

not be inspired by that. You see that, and you think, 'Here's someone who I could risk my life for and know that it would be worth it.' I didn't think all this consciously, in the situation, but I think it all factored in. The short version is still right: It seemed like the right thing to do."

"Thank you, Justin, that's a pretty good answer," said Hugo. "I would ask Harry his reaction, but I know there's not much he could say. So, Hermione, I'll ask you instead. What's your reaction to what Justin said?"

"I'm not surprised, Hugo," she said. "I can easily see where Harry would inspire that sort of feeling even in people who don't know him that well. I've heard that quite a few people around the school have said they would have joined, or that they would have if they knew how to do the spell. So, I think there are a number of people who would have felt as Justin did. Which is not to take away from what Justin did, which was terrific. He could have saved all our lives, for all we know. Maybe three wouldn't have been enough." Ron and Neville nodded, indicating they'd considered that as well.

"I actually did think of that, too," added Justin. "I couldn't back out of helping, thinking, 'they've got it in hand,' because I knew they were in big danger too. It was easier to do it, knowing that they would as well. And you have to be inspired by what they were going to do, too. They set an example that you feel like you want to follow." Harry smiled as the others now were embarrassed.

"Hermione, and I want to ask Justin the same thing in a minute, you're Muggle-born, and your parents have no connection to the wizarding world. How do they feel about you taking this kind of risk?"

"I don't know, Hugo, because I try not to tell them about stuff like this," she said, grinning sheepishly. "They would just worry. Also, they don't know what's at stake, and it would be hard to explain it to them."

"As for me," said Justin, "I haven't had to make that decision yet; fortunately, my brother hasn't said anything to our parents. I may do what Hermione did, for the same reasons. There's no great reason to tell them, and they would worry, might even want to yank us away from here."

"Ron?"

"Well, of course my parents know extremely well what's at stake, and they approve of what I do; I know they're proud. They worry, of course, especially my mum, like I imagine all mothers do. But also, Harry's a part of our family now, so she worries about him as much as she does me." He chuckled. "Worrying about Harry, now that could be a full-time job."

"Neville?"

"I haven't talked to my grandmother since before Hogsmeade, so I'm not sure, but I'm pretty sure she'll be proud, and won't criticize what I did. My parents..." Neville paused, making a decision. "My parents were Aurors, and as some people know, were involved in fighting Voldemort the last time around. When I was a baby, they were captured by Death Eaters and tortured with the Cruciatus Curse until they lost their minds, so my gran's raised me. She and I are both proud of what they did, what they fought for. She's already lost a lot to Voldemort, and she knows he has to be fought. She knows there are risks, and that they're worth taking."

Harry saw that, like him, Ron and Hermione were looking at Neville with respect and admiration, knowing what a difficult topic that had been for him. Hermione, sitting next to Neville, gave his arm a squeeze. He nodded at her in gratitude.

"Harry?"

"If you're referring to my aunt and uncle, they don't take any interest in wizarding affairs; they would just as soon not know about it." He ended his answer without any further elaboration, confident that Hugo would know why what was unspoken was unspoken.

"Harry, I'm sorry, but I have to ask you a couple of hard questions here," Hugo said. "First of all, do you think there's any connection between what happened in Hogsmeade and your campaign to say Voldemort's name?"

"Yes, I'd be surprised if that wasn't the case," said Harry. "The fact that it happened while students were in the village, the fact that I was specifically targeted, seem to make it pretty clear."

"So, then, it seems clear that the four who died would still be alive had you never started your efforts to say Voldemort's name. It's obvious that this has occurred to you. How have the deaths affected you personally? Do you feel any responsibility, any blame, attaches to you?"

Harry had known he would be asked this question, and had thought about his answer. "To the first question... I was very personally affected by their deaths. I had taught them all, and liked them all. I cried for them, as I'm sure that many at Hogwarts did. We'll miss them. As to the second question... I think everyone knows where the blame and responsibility for this lie, and that's with Voldemort, who ordered it. You're right when you say this wouldn't have happened except for my campaign, and that this had obviously occurred to me. You even mentioned the possibility when you interviewed me in September. But innocents are always going to die when Voldemort is around, as we know from last time. Cedric Diggory was killed for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and maybe this is a bit similar. What it does is bring home more strongly the point that Voldemort has to be stopped, or

this sort of thing will keep happening. And anybody who thinks that we shouldn't fight him because of things like this, well, that's exactly what he wants, that's why he does this. You couldn't reward him any better for killing people than to say, all right, we won't fight you anymore. The more people die, the harder our resolve has to be. There's nothing else for it."

There was silence for a short time. Then Hugo said, "Okay, Harry, everyone, I guess that's all I need. But one other thing... you four, I very much admire what you did. I'm not sure I could do it, at least not right now. Who knows, maybe I could if I was around Harry long enough. But the wizarding world owes you quite a debt. Thanks for talking to me, and thanks for saving him."

They acknowledged his compliment, thanked him, and got up. "Harry, could you stay behind for a moment?" Harry nodded. The others left, but Justin hung back. "Harry, there was something I wanted to mention to you... we're not still on the record, are we?" he asked Hugo, who shook his head.

"Harry, I thought you should know... on Thursday night, it must have been, there was a time when I was sort of awake, but not very... I couldn't move, wasn't awake enough to move, but I could hear things. I think this was around the time Neville woke up, and I heard a person who I didn't expect to hear, who you were obviously friendly with."

Harry understood that Justin was being cautious because he didn't know what Hugo knew. "If you mean who I think you mean, Hugo already knows. Do you mean Pansy?"

Justin nodded. "I wondered if I was dreaming, or hearing things wrong. It's almost like you were suddenly buddies with Malfoy. What in the world happened?"

Harry took a few minutes to explain it. Justin shook his head in amazement. "It's going to be tough to get used to," he said. "If Malfoy finds out, she'll really be in trouble, he'll be furious." Harry agreed, and gave Justin the now-standard security lecture: Tell no one, even people you trust. Justin said he understood, then left.

Hugo looked uncomfortable. "Harry, I'm sorry I had to ask that last question. I just didn't see how I could avoid it, some people would make that connection. I could tell that your answer was honest, but that what you said is almost what you know is true and want to believe, rather than what you believe now. I could tell that you're finding it very hard to detach yourself from the deaths, and I felt bad for asking, because it just reminds you of that. It really is not your fault."

Harry thanked him, then said, "Everyone's been telling me that, and it's true on a certain level, I know. On a big scale, we probably did better with me doing the campaign than without. But I wouldn't want to look into the eyes of those kids' parents and tell them that. That's where I have a problem."

"I understand. I can tell how hard it was for you."

"Thanks, Hugo. I guess you're coming to the Halloween feast tonight?"

Hugo nodded. "I think it was a good idea to have it anyway, even though Halloween was last week. I think I'll spend some time at the Slytherin table, see how people are responding to Malfoy's absence."

"I'd be very interested in what you find out," said Harry, with a small grin.

"I think I can fit you in for a quick word before I leave," agreed Hugo.

The Halloween decorations were up, the ghosts were present, and there was as much festive cheer in the Great Hall as the circumstances permitted. At Dumbledore's request, Harry sat at the teachers' table at the beginning of the feast. He assured Harry that he could join his friends later.

Harry was sitting between Flitwick and McGonagall. He absently wondered whether whoever arranged the seating went out of their way to make sure he was never seated next to Snape. He didn't want to think about having to make small talk with Snape, and wondered how the other teachers did it. Even when not antagonistic, Snape did not engage in idle conversation.

Flitwick did, though, and Harry enjoyed talking to him. He had been telling Harry stories, from the sound of them told many times before. Harry found Flitwick to be good at telling stories, and they were very interesting, mostly ones based in interesting things students had done in his class. He was halfway through one when Dumbledore asked for everyone's attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Halloween feast. Before we tuck into our food, though, I would like to make a few comments and a few presentations.

"Directing your attention to the head of the Gryffindor table, we have a few guests today, including most of the Weasley family: Arthur, Molly, Bill, Fred, and George." Recognition of the last two names brought decent applause, to which the twins ostentatiously turned and waved, to the embarrassment of their mother.

"The last two were well known around the school for their practical jokes, and in recognition of this, I have played a small one on them. They were asked here tonight to witness members of their family being given Special Awards for Services to the School. That was true, strictly speaking, but misleading. For their services to the school near the end of last year in supporting and raising the morale of the staff and their fellow students, we give Special Awards for Services to the School to, in alphabetical order, Messrs. Fred and George Weasley."

The audience exploded in cheers, drowning out Dumbledore's request for the twins to come forward, though they heard enough to do so. They stepped up to the podium and shook hands with Dumbledore, then turned to address the crowd.

"Thank you, we're honored," said Fred. "And very surprised. We didn't know Professor Dumbledore had this kind of sense of humor."

As the crowd chuckled, Dumbledore leaned in and said, "Oh, there's more. You'll find a few surprises embedded in your food, which I expect you to completely finish." This got a big laugh, including from the twins.

"I must say, Professor Dumbledore having a joke with us is at least as good as the award itself," said George. "And while it's true we did what we did to support Professor Dumbledore, we won't deny that it was good advertising."

"He means, for our shop, Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, located at eighty-nine Diagon Alley," added Fred.

"Yes, so do come by on your Christmas vacations for an exploding Christmas tree ornament, or our Christmas fudge, which turns you into a reindeer."

"And we'd like to say thank you to Professor Dumbledore and the staff for this award," said Fred. "We can only hope that the students who are assigned detention for using our products will be made to keep our award polished." They waved and stepped down, again to great applause.

Dumbledore stepped forward again. "We have one more award to present, this one for services provided this year. We usually wait until the end of the year to give such awards, but an exception is being made in this case. As I call your name, please step forward, next to me. For outstanding bravery in facing grave peril to save the life of a friend, in alphabetical order... Mr. Justin Finch-Fletchley!"

The audience burst into applause, especially the Hufflepuff table, which went wild. Grinning, Justin stepped to the front and shook Dumbledore's hand. Harry noticed Ernie smiling and applauding along with everyone else, happy for his friend.

"Miss Hermione Granger!"

Hermione practically ran to the podium, so excited was she. She kissed Dumbledore on the cheek, both of them looking quite pleased. Then she stood next to Justin and beamed, enjoying the applause.

"Mr. Neville Longbottom!"

Neville stepped forward, and Harry suddenly noticed a woman near the teachers' table he hadn't known was there: Esmerelda Longbottom, Neville's grandmother. She was smiling and applauding, if in a somewhat reserved way. When Neville got to the podium, Hermione interrupted his enjoyment of the applause to point out his grandmother. Neville, who obviously hadn't known she was there, did a double-take and looked astonished. "She's never come here before," Harry barely heard Neville say to Hermione near the podium.

"Mr. Ron Weasley!"

Ron bounded up to the podium, smiling. The Weasley family applauded vigorously, especially Molly, obviously bursting with pride. Dumbledore said, "Will the four of you please choose a representative from among you to address the audience?" A finger from each of the others pointed at Hermione, who stepped forward.

"First of all, thank you all for the support you've given us over the past few days. That's a pretty good reward, as well as this award. But the best reward for what we did... he's sitting right over there," she said, gesturing toward Harry. The crowd applauded again, even more loudly. Harry was trying not to act as embarrassed as he felt. As the applause died down, Hermione continued, "I think we all would like to thank Harry for being the kind of person for whom you can do what we did without hesitation or regret. And again, thank you all." The crowd applauded one more time, as Hermione, on her way down from the podium, stopped at where Harry was sitting, leaned over, and kissed the top of his head. The other three patted his shoulder as they walked by.

"And now," said Dumbledore, "it is time to eat. I suggest that everyone check the Weasley twins from time to time, to see if anything interesting is happening." The food suddenly appeared on everyone's plates, as Neville's grandmother walked over to join the Weasleys, talking to Molly and Arthur. As Neville made his way back to his seat, Harry saw his grandmother intercept him, talk to him for a few minutes, then kiss him on the cheek before letting him return to his seat.

About five minutes into his meal, listening to Flitwick complete the story during which he'd been cut off earlier, Harry heard a burst of laughter from the crowd. He looked up to see that George had turned into a very large kitten, roughly human-sized, and standing on two hind legs, but still a kitten. Hermione and Ginny got up and started petting him as though he were a real kitten, drawing more laughs. Playing along, George rubbed his head against Hermione's shoulder as a normal cat would. After Fred had recovered from his laughter, his next bite of food turned him into a hippogriff. Harry couldn't help but think that Dumbledore's contribution to morale-building had been almost as good as Fred and George's. Each transformation lasted for one minute, and there were four more in each twin's meal, each for a different animal.

Watching this gave Harry a warm feeling, and made him think about how he would miss Hogwarts after he graduated. Staying on as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher felt tempting, but he knew he still wanted to be an Auror. He wondered whether the Aurors ever had this much fun.

* * * * *

Harry lay in bed later that night, stuffed from the feast and contented with the warmth and companionship he'd felt. He knew his fellow students, and his fellow teachers, were as much with him as they ever had been. They didn't blame him. Nobody blamed him, to his amazement, or acted like he was in any way responsible for the deaths. Why couldn't he feel the same way?

Hugo had been right, Harry knew. In the interview, he had said what he knew he should say, and what his logical mind knew was right. Even talking to his friends, to people like Ernie, he had acted more like he was sure that he was blameless than he really was. He wondered whether he was simply trying to convince himself, or if he really did believe it when he said it. All alone, in his bed, he didn't believe it.

He knew all the arguments backwards and forwards by now. He didn't need to review them again, but he did so anyway. Voldemort had to be fought. He couldn't be fought by people who were too afraid to say his name. Harry was in an ideal position to conduct a campaign to get them to do so, and no one else was doing it. His campaign had done a great deal of good from a strategic standpoint; it could end up having saved lives, far more than were lost. Dumbledore was right, everyone was right. He couldn't argue it.

Then he thought of eight parents who would never see their children again. For whom every Christmas for the rest of their lives would be a reminder of what they had lost. He imagined the parents holding one another, still crying over their loss. Suddenly, all the arguments didn't matter a bit. It wouldn't have happened if not for him. He turned over onto his stomach, buried his head in his pillow, and started sobbing.

Chapter 16

The Aurors

Harry walked into the Great Hall on Friday a few minutes after noon, as usual, after teaching his last Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson of the week. He sat down next to Neville, across from Ron and Hermione.

"So, how was Herbology?" he asked. The other three had a Herbology class which ended just before noon on Fridays.

"Well, you remember that we have that with the Slytherins," Ron said, looking none too happy about it. "Malfoy made his first comment about what Neville said in the paper, about his parents. Scum that he is," he added, unnecessarily.

"It wasn't even very clever," added Hermione. "He just asked Neville if he'd seen his parents in the loony bin lately. We were all furious, of course. We knew he'd do it eventually, but still..."

"But Neville did good, though," said Ron, clearly proud. "He didn't answer for a little bit-half the class was watching, they wanted to see what Neville would do-and then Neville said, 'I'm kind of busy now, Malfoy. Why don't we meet at the Quidditch pitch later, and we can discuss it?'"

Harry laughed, since of course Malfoy was presently not allowed to go anywhere in the school except classes. "Good one, Neville," he said. "Well done."

Neville smiled. "Thanks, Harry. Professor Sprout came by later and gave me a big smile. Malfoy was really angry, and most of the class laughed, even some Slytherins, mostly the girls. I'm sure she wanted to, too." Neville's odd emphasis on the word 'she' made it clear he was referring to Pansy, whose name they didn't want to use in public in case they were overheard.

"I'm sure she laughed on the inside, Neville," said Hermione. "I should ask her about that tonight."

"Oh, that's right, you gave her the notebooks on Tuesday," said Harry, keeping his voice down. "How's that going?"

"Really good. We've talked for about two hours a night so far."

"Wow," said Ron. "How are you going to get your studying done?"

"It would be a bit of a problem if it continued for any length of time," she admitted. "I think it's just so new to her right now, having someone to talk to with no set time limit and no danger of being caught, like there always is when she meets Harry. She's just so keen to talk, it's like she's been really hungry for a long time, and now she can finally eat almost as much as she wants. I think she'll get full at some point. Anyway, I do some studying while waiting for her answers, but I'm just not going to tell her I can't talk to her because I have to study. She's a nice person, and she deserves our support."

"Yes, she does," Harry agreed. "It really is amazing what a nice person she's turned out to be. She was really good to me the night I woke up from the curse."

"How do you mean, Harry?" asked Neville.

"She was the one who was there, and she had to tell me about the ones who'd died. I just lost it, totally broke down. She just held me for a very long time, tried to make me feel better. Nothing was going to, of course, but she really wanted to. When you feel like I felt that night, you just need to know that you have a friend there, that somebody really wants to help you, even if they can't. It was really good of her."

"Well, you know how she feels about you, Harry," said Hermione. "I know she was happy to be able to do it. But I'll tell her what you said."

"How are you doing with that now, Harry?" Neville asked.

"You mean, the fact that the people died? It still bothers me, of course. Why do you ask?"

Neville paused, uncertain about whether he should say anything or not. "I... I've heard you." He looked apologetic. "I think you've cried every night now, for the past five nights."

Harry was embarrassed, but not mortified; he knew they would be understanding, even Ron, and wouldn't tease him about it. "Could you hear it, Ron?"

Ron nodded uncomfortably. "I don't want to intrude, Harry, I really don't. But those rooms are pretty quiet. I think you're trying to be quiet, you're just not quite managing it. We're concerned about you."

"Well, I guess I'm not sure what the normal mourning period is for people whose deaths you've..." Harry went silent, knowing how the word 'caused' would sound to the others, and to himself. He figured his meaning was clear anyway.

"Harry..." Hermione's tone and expression were pleading. "Look, what if, one Hogsmeade weekend I said I wanted to meet you in front of the Owl Office. You got there, were waiting for me, and a Death Eater snuck up on you and killed you. That wouldn't be my fault in any way, but I could blame myself, saying that you'd still be alive if I hadn't asked you to meet me there. That's what this situation is like."

"It's not exactly the same, since I knowingly put people's lives in danger," Harry said. "But I do see what you mean. It's just that... I know what all the arguments are, and they make sense. There's just something in me that won't let it go, that won't let me off the hook. Probably it's because they were so young, and death is so... permanent. I was able to forgive myself for you getting Cursed, at least partly because it's the kind of thing that, though it's horrible, you can get past. This is different."

"But Harry, Voldemort has to be fought... I know, I'm not telling you anything you don't already know, it's not rational. And I know I would have no idea how long would be a normal time for you to feel the way you do. All we're saying is that we're concerned. So... please don't be mad at us, Harry, but we went and talked to Professor Dumbledore this morning. We just wanted to know what he thought."

Harry shoved down his initial impulse to be angry; he could understand why they were concerned. He was silent for a moment, then muttered, "Bet I know whose idea that was."

Ron glared at him. "Well, then, you'd be wrong, because it was mine." Harry looked up, startled. Ron was giving him a 'what do you think of that?' look. "I may

have the emotional range of a thimble, or whatever Hermione said last year, but I'm not too thick to know that there's a problem here. I thought Dumbledore might be able to do something to help you, or reassure us that it was normal."

"And what did he say?" asked Harry, interested.

"I don't think he said whether it was normal or not," said Hermione, "but he said it wasn't surprising. He said that he doubts that a sixteen-year-old has ever been put into this kind of position, and that this sort of thing may be the hardest thing for you about your position of leadership, maybe even harder than facing Voldemort. He said it's hard for him, and he's been doing it for many years."

Ron nodded, impressed. "He said he's lost count of the number of times he's cried for people who have died, all the times he's irrationally blamed himself. That made us feel a bit better. But then he said that however good your heart is, that's how much you'd suffer."

"That made us feel worse," said Hermione. "Basically, he's concerned for you too, but knows there's no way out except through, and the first time is always going to be the hardest. Not that it gets easier, he said, but just because it's the kind of thing that nothing can prepare you for. He also said that you can't truly understand it unless you've experienced it. I think that was his way of telling us nicely that we really can't know what you're going through, which I suppose is fair enough. It doesn't mean we don't want to help you, though."

Harry sighed. "I know, and I appreciate it, both of you. I don't know what you can do, though, or even what I can do. It's almost like something I can't control, as if my body is doing something it needs to do."

Hermione nodded. "Maybe it is, for all we know. Maybe that's why Dumbledore's not that concerned. Well, he is, but you know what I mean. Like I said, he doesn't seem to think it's all that surprising. I expect he would try to do something specific to help you if he thought there was something really wrong."

"If I'm still crying about it in a month or so, then I guess I'll suspect that there is," Harry said. "In the meantime, I guess we'll just see how it goes." He pulled up his bag from the floor, and started to dig some letters out of it. He had been getting more mail as a result of the Hogsmeade attack and the latest Hugo Brantell article, and had taken to shoving it all into his bag in the morning, rather than try to look at it as he ate breakfast. He paused as a standard Muggle-type letter fell out of a larger envelope. "Hey, this one's from my Aunt Petunia!" he said in surprise.

The others were surprised too; even Neville, who knew the least about Harry's family situation, knew enough to know that this was very strange. Harry started to open it.

"Hey, Harry, how do they send you mail, anyway? They don't have access to owls, after all," asked Ron.

"I guess you wouldn't know this, Ron, but-" started Hermione.

"I wish I had a Galleon for every time I heard you say those words," grumbled Ron.

"-Muggles post letters to one central, Muggle-recognized address, where they're received by wizards and then forwarded on," she finished, as if Ron hadn't interrupted.

"I must say, I'm surprised she even knows the address," said Harry as he read the letter. "Well, not surprisingly, she's annoyed. I knew she wasn't just writing to say hello. 'We've gotten ten owls in the past three days, including three copies of the article about you. It's nice that your friends saved your life, but what does that have to do with us? You even say in the article that we have no interest in wizarding affairs, and they go and send us things anyway! Can't they read? What is their problem? I gather they feel we should be interested, which they have no business deciding. Can't you do something about these people? You know how we feel about owls.' It goes on a bit more, but you get the general drift of it."

Ron made an unpleasant face. "Yes, Harry, it's nice that you survived a few deadly attacks, but the real problem is all that unwanted mail. The poor woman." Neville just shook his head.

"Like I can control what people in the wizarding community do," Harry agreed.

"Oh, dear, I hope nobody got the idea to write to my parents and tell them what I'm doing, or worse yet, send them the article," said Hermione anxiously. "I hate to think what they would think. Hopefully I'm not famous enough for them to bother."

"Save Harry's life a few more times and you really will be famous," said Ron.

"Aha, a disincentive," pointed out Harry.

Hermione gave Harry a 'be serious' look. "I'll deal with being as famous as I have to be, to keep you alive," she said.

"That's the spirit," Ron said. "No sacrifice too great."

"It would be a sacrifice," Harry said. "Believe me, I'm in a position to know."

"Harry, that makes me wonder... I've heard you complain about being famous, but are there ever any advantages to it?" asked Neville. "I don't mean people getting all excited because you're Harry Potter, I know you don't like that. I mean other things."

Harry thought hard; it was an interesting question. "Well, there's a lot of goodwill I get by being Harry Potter, but that doesn't seem to actually affect me very often. Also, sometimes when people are being nice to me, it's hard to tell

whether that has anything to do with it or not. I guess there probably are advantages, but they're not obvious too often. Do you think I seem ungrateful about it?"

"I wouldn't use the word 'ungrateful,'" Neville said apologetically, "but I just noticed that you don't have much that's good to say about it. So I was just wondering."

Harry got back to his food, thinking about it. If only people didn't stare so much, he thought, it wouldn't be so bad. After a few bites, he opened up another letter and read it. It was along the same lines as was usual, with general praise for him and encouragement of what he was doing. Harry wished he could appreciate such praise more, but especially after the deaths, he was in no mood for praise of any kind.

He opened the next letter, an official-looking one. As he read it, he had a feeling of incredulity, as if this couldn't possibly be happening. Finishing it, he put his head in his hands. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ron looking at him. "What?" said Ron.

Wondering what Ron's reaction would be, Harry handed him the letter without comment. Ron's eyes practically bulged as he read it. "It's the people who make Chocolate Frogs... they want to put Harry on a card!" Neville looked awestruck, as did Ron. Hermione looked impressed, but not awed.

"Well, if you think about it, it's not that surprising," she said, as Ron and Neville looked at her as if she didn't quite appreciate the honor being done Harry. "Harry's always been famous, and that's one of the things they want when they put someone on a card. But the person on the card also has to have accomplished something in particular, something really noteworthy. Harry's done two such things this year: the spell, and defying Voldemort in the face of extreme duress. Considering that, Harry's an ideal candidate for a card." She regarded Ron and Neville for a moment; they still wore rather awed expressions. "Honestly, I think you two are more impressed with this than the spell Harry came up with."

"If you collected Chocolate Frog cards, Hermione, you'd be more impressed too," replied Ron.

Neville nodded his agreement. "They only make them for wizards who are really legendary," he said. "I'm not sure, but I think that Dumbledore's the only living wizard who has a card."

"Well, Harry deserves it, of course, but I'm sure the Chocolate Frog people are thinking that this will really boost sales," Hermione said.

Ron and Neville looked at her as if she had insulted Harry. "Hermione!" said Neville scoldingly. Harry was surprised; he had never heard Neville use such a tone. I guess I'd better get used to Neville changing, he thought.

"What?" she asked, defensively. "I said he deserved it."

"Well, it doesn't matter, because I'm not going to let them do it," said Harry. "I get embarrassed enough as it is with fuss being made over me, I don't need this." Ron and Neville looked at him as if he were crazy, even though they knew him well enough to have predicted his reaction.

Hermione answered him. "Don't be silly, Harry, of course you have to let them do it. We know you, and we know you'd rather not. But you have to."

Harry's tone was almost hostile. "Why? Why do I have to?"

She used the tone that had always annoyed him, the tone that suggested that what she was saying was blindingly obvious, and that she really shouldn't even have to be saying it to him. "Harry, the fact that you're the Boy Who Lived will be mentioned on the card, of course, but you'd be worthy of one in any case. But you have to do it because you're a public figure, a symbol of the fight against Voldemort. You survived him as a baby, you survived his return, you drove him out of your mind. You're very symbolic now, and having you on a card will be a very good thing for the wizarding world. Children will get your card, and it'll help them understand what you've done and what you're trying to do. They'll identify with you, and want to do what you've done. That's the sort of spirit we need in the wizarding community. A card would be a way of reaching children, in the same way Hugo's articles have reached adults. You have to do this, Harry. It would be a waste not to."

Harry closed his eyes; he couldn't believe that this had happened. He could see Hermione's point, but just felt he couldn't deal with it. Hermione saw this, and persisted. "Harry, I know what you're thinking. You already feel bad about what happened in Hogsmeade, and you're in even less of a mood than ever to be considered any kind of hero or example to others. I understand, and I might feel the same way if I were you. But this could be, surely will be, good for the morale of the community, especially children. You have to put that above your personal feelings."

Harry still didn't speak, but now the others were waiting for him. After a minute, he finally said, "I can't say I don't see your point, Hermione. It's just hard for me to accept, is all. I don't feel real good about myself right now, and this seems... way out of proportion, somehow."

"Harry, Hermione's right," said Neville, looking at Harry earnestly. "You have to stop thinking about yourself, you have to think about how this affects others. You probably didn't think about this, but this will mean that I'll be able to say that I once helped save the life of someone who has a Chocolate Frog card. Please don't

take that away from me." Only after he finished speaking did a small smile cross Neville's face.

Harry couldn't help but smile. "I'm sorry, Neville, I shouldn't be so selfish," he said in the same vein. "Tell you what, I'll go talk to Dumbledore. If he says I should do it, then I'll do it. Don't worry, Hermione, I'll tell him what you said."

She looked almost smug. "That's okay, Harry. He'll tell you what I said."

Five minutes later, Dumbledore did just that. "Of course, you should let them do it, Harry. It is quite an honor, one of which especially your recent actions have made you deserving." He went on to say roughly what Hermione had said, which Harry told Dumbledore, who smiled. "Well, there you are. If Hermione agrees with me, then I must be right."

"I'm sure she'll say it's the other way around, sir," Harry said. "All right, I'll do it. I just don't like the idea right now, coming so soon after... Ron and Hermione told me that they were in here earlier, and about what. They told me that you seemed to think it wasn't out of line with what happened. How long do you think it will last? How long will it be until I'm able to go to bed and not think about it, not dwell on the families, and so forth? I always imagine them..." He trailed off, knowing Dumbledore knew what he was saying.

In Dumbledore's eyes, Harry saw the same compassion he had seen the first time they had talked after Hogsmeade. "We cannot know how long it will take, or even should take. Few people are put in the position that you are in, that I am in. It is one of the hardest things a person can do. Most people do not understand this, which is why it will not be cited on your Chocolate Frog card. But it is true nonetheless. You cannot be quite the same person after this happens as you were before.

"You see, Harry, your heart and your mind are fighting a struggle. Your mind is telling you all the practical aspects of the situation, all the arguments that I have made and Hermione has made and that you know are correct. Your heart refuses to accept the death and suffering of others, and desperately wishes you not to be a part of the equation in any way. What is happening now is your heart expressing its grief over what has happened, and its desire that nothing like this happen again. For you to function as a leader, you must respect and honor your heart, and listen to it, but ultimately do what your head tells you is of the greatest benefit to all. Your heart only knows the suffering that is here and now.

"This type of theme recurs. You experienced it first when Hermione was Cursed, and even referring to last year, I said a few months ago that sometimes we must suffer damage in the short run to avoid greater damage in the long run. Also, recall our conversation after the confrontation in the Department of Mysteries. I

told you of my great mistake, that I cared for you so much, too much to tell you what you needed to know. I said, 'What did I care if numbers of nameless and faceless people and creatures were slaughtered in the vague future, if in the here and now, you were happy?' I listened to my heart over my head, and Sirius died when he need not have."

Harry winced. "Sir, that wasn't your fault-"

"I do not mean to assign blame to myself. I know that the fault for his death lies with Bellatrix Lestrange and Voldemort. I merely point out that the causal relationship between my actions and Sirius's death is greater than the one between yours and the Hogsmeade deaths. You cannot blame yourself for the Hogsmeade deaths and not blame me for Sirius's. But the point I was originally making was the heart's focus on the here and now. I fell into that trap by waiting too long to tell you of the prophecy. It is the kind of trap I have usually avoided in the past, when it came to people I felt less close to than you. You, even knowing all the facts, would have been tempted to sacrifice great long-term interests for short-term ones, because of your heart. So it is not surprising that your heart should rebel at what happened in Hogsmeade. As Professor Snape said, what you have done will very likely end up saving more lives than were lost. But you cannot see, or easily imagine, the happiness, the comfort, the wholeness of the families who did not lose someone they would have lost, if not for your actions. It may be useful for you to try to do so."

Harry thought a bit, then nodded. "That makes sense, sir, I'll try to do that. I just... never thought I would have people's deaths on my conscience. I feared it a few times, when Ron and Hermione went into danger with me. But this time it actually happened, just in a different way. It's been very hard for me to adjust to that."

"As I have said, it will always be hard to deal with, especially with this being the first time. You have done some very brave things, Harry, and some very hard things. I think it would not harm anyone, or dishonor anyone's memory, were you to enjoy being given a Chocolate Frog card."

"I remember Fred and George saying, when the Ministry had you removed from those posts last year, that you didn't care what they did so long as they didn't take you off the Chocolate Frog cards. You do enjoy being on them, don't you?" asked Harry, his tone making it sound more like a statement than a question.

Dumbledore smiled. "It was a joke with more than a little truth in it. The posts from which I was removed are important, but also political, which was shown by the ease with which I was removed. The Chocolate Frog cards are not at all political, and so are a more reliable indicator of the esteem in which I am held. I was very flattered to be given one, especially while I was still alive. It is quite an honor. It is

also good because many students see my card before coming to Hogwarts, causing them to tend to treat me with a certain respect."

Harry couldn't help but smile. "Sir, all you need to do to get people's respect is walk into the room."

"Why, you may yet cause me to blush, Harry. Thank you. But not all people, obviously, if they do not like what I am saying, as we saw last year. That is why it is best not to fall in love with fame; it can turn on you in a second. But it appears that for you, it is enough of a struggle merely to tolerate fame. I assume that is part of the reason you were inclined to resist the card."

Harry nodded. "I've never been happy with fame, which is funny, considering how some people lust after it. I guess I have to get used to the idea that by doing what I do, I'm kind of stuck with it. I don't know if I can ever enjoy it, but maybe I can try not to be so bothered by it."

"That is a good idea. We must always try to accept that which cannot be changed. In this situation your fame is helpful. Not to you personally, but to the cause you lead. In particular, note how there is symmetry in the reason for your fame, and your activities now. You have always been a symbol of resistance to Voldemort, and you are doubly so now."

Harry was starting to accept that this was true, and if it was, he may as well make the most of it. "Sir, do you think the Chocolate Frog people would send me a few dozen of the card they make of me if I asked them to? I can think of some people who would probably like one."

"I am glad to hear you say that," said Dumbledore with amusement. "And yes, I believe that while the company would prefer that everyone buy more Chocolate Frogs in order to get your card, they would not say no to you. By all means, mention it to them in your answer."

Harry got up to leave. "I will. And thank you, sir. Talking to you always makes me feel better."

"I am very glad, Harry. Perhaps you should do so more often, in that case."

Harry chuckled. "Maybe I should. By the way, did I ever tell you... on the train to Hogwarts, in my first year, the first Chocolate Frog card I ever got was yours."

"It was obviously fate," said Dumbledore. Harry couldn't tell whether he was joking or not, then decided it didn't matter. He smiled and left.

Harry saw Dumbledore again relatively soon, as Friday after lunch was when he had his Defense Against the Dark Arts class with Dumbledore. He was talking with Ernie and Justin when Dumbledore entered. As usual, the classroom went silent.

"Good day, everyone. Today's topic will be dueling," There was a murmur of interest; they had never studied this before, and it was considered a more interesting topic than usual, based on dueling playing an important part in wizard legend, as well as popular fiction. Harry felt that for he and his friends, it held even more interest, as they might well need to use it.

"Dueling looks like wizards simply waving their wands at each other, but it is very complicated, and difficult to master. Several types of ability factor into one's dueling skill. Firstly, one must have good mastery of silent spellwork." Harry saw a few people look at him. "One cannot vocalize one's spells in dueling, since the spells are sent by the opponent so rapidly. One would lose the duel quickly. Secondly, one must have excellent tactical instincts. Good reflexes and steady nerves are also of great importance.

"From a defensive point of view, one should keep oneself protected at all times, using the Protection Charm. But as there are some spells against which the Protection Charm is less than effective, one must keep on the offensive as well. In advanced dueling, most do not even use the Protection Charm, but rather use their own spells to both attack and block what the other person sends. That aspect of dueling will be covered next year; for now, we will focus on the fundamentals."

Dumbledore went on to explain the details of how it worked, and showed them how to practice using the 'Blue' spell. They paired off and practiced. After a while, Dumbledore asked them to change partners, so Harry changed from Hermione to Neville. Practicing with Neville, Harry found it a little easy to get through Neville's defenses, so Harry called Dumbledore over and they both worked with him on it. Neville was soon able to get the Protection Charm working fluidly in conjunction with his offensive spells. After another ten minutes of practice, Harry suddenly found it very hard indeed to get past Neville's defenses. He saw the same kind of intensity on Neville's face as he had seen in the D.A. last year, and was heartened.

"Very good, everyone, you are picking it up well," said Dumbledore after another ten minutes of practice. "Now, before we move on to our next subject, we will have a small tournament to determine who is the most proficient in this class at this time. The winner of this class's tournament will then compete against the winner from the other sixth-year class. The winner will receive a small prize that I have donated: a candle that never burns out, and will emit any aroma which is possible for a candle, on request." Harry saw Hermione's eyes light up; she obviously wanted it. Neville glanced at Harry; he had seen it too. Harry decided that if he won, he would give it to her.

Dumbledore split them up into pairs, and each dueled in front of the class. With sixteen students in the class, it worked perfectly: there would be eight

winners, then four in the next round, then two, and finally one. Each match was decided by two wins out of three; a win was achieved by turning the opponent blue.

Dumbledore appeared to be using a kind of seeding system; it seemed as if the eight strongest students were paired up against the eight weakest ones, and the strongest ones won their matches. Harry beat Parvati, Ron beat Seamus, Neville beat Dean, and Hermione beat Hannah. In the second round, Harry beat Justin, while Neville beat Ernie, much to Ernie's obvious annoyance. Ron and Hermione also won, and so would play each other, and Harry would play Neville. Hermione took the first bout from Ron, but he came back and won the next two, to advance to the final. Hermione looked unusually disappointed.

Harry knew he would have a tough time with Neville, but he expected to win. Their wands flashed as they started; Neville was quick, at least as quick as Harry, and Harry again saw a look of fierce determination on Neville's face. He obviously wanted this badly. Neville finally got in under Harry's defenses, as Harry saw his hand turn blue. The class gasped lightly; it was clear that they, too, expected Harry to win. In the second bout, Harry focused more on defense, and it went on for a minute and a half, far longer than any other bout, most of which had lasted less than fifteen seconds. Harry finally broke through for the win. In the deciding bout, Harry tried to focus harder. It went on for over a minute, but eventually Harry made a mistake and saw his hand turn blue again. The class truly gasped this time, and applauded at how hard-fought the bouts were. Harry smiled and shook Neville's hand. "You did great, Neville," he said.

Satisfied and pleased, Neville turned to face Ron. The bouts were much shorter than Neville's with Harry; Neville took Ron out in less than thirty seconds each time, and again got applause from the class. Ron shook Neville's hand as well, and moved over to where Harry was standing. "How did he get that good?" Ron whispered.

Harry shrugged. "He was really determined, that's all I know for sure."

"Excellent, Neville, that was very well done. The win over Harry was especially impressive. We all know that Harry's skills with a wand are excellent, and given that his non-vocalized spells are as effective as his vocalized ones, you had a handicap to overcome. Most impressive indeed." Neville glowed, but still looked determined. "Now, I have arranged for the winner from the other class to come here. Let us see if he has arrived." Dumbledore went to the door and opened it, and in walked Draco Malfoy, followed by Professor Snape, obviously Malfoy's escort.

Suddenly Harry understood the reason for Neville's attitude. At first Harry wondered if Neville had just wanted the candle, but now he realized that Neville had guessed or known that Malfoy had been the winner in the other class, and that he

badly wanted to beat Malfoy in retaliation for his remark about his parents. Harry walked up to Neville and whispered, "You can do it, Neville. Go get him."

Malfoy stood at the front of the class, smug as ever. Harry had little doubt that he had practiced with his father, but probably not too much with the 'Blue' spell. "The winner will be determined by three wins out of five," Dumbledore announced. "Will this class's champion please step forward."

Neville stepped forward, stopping opposite Malfoy. Malfoy's jaw dropped; he was not bothering to hide his astonishment. "Sorry, Malfoy," said Neville, grinning. "I know you were hoping for Harry." The class laughed; Malfoy looked more smug than ever.

Dumbledore started them on their first bout, and five seconds later, Malfoy was a deep shade of blue, again looking astonished. Watching the bout, Harry felt that Malfoy had been so overconfident that he could break through Neville's defense that he had neglected his own defense. The second bout was again won by Neville, this time taking about thirty seconds. In the third bout, Malfoy was clearly taking Neville seriously, a look of determination nearly matching Neville's was on his face. A little past the one-minute mark, Malfoy turned blue, and it was over. The class had not cheered for Neville's first two wins, not wanting to celebrate prematurely, but they let it all out now, cheering wildly. After a few seconds, Dumbledore quieted them; Harry saw Neville give Malfoy a very satisfied smile. "That was very well played, on both sides," he said. Harry didn't think so; he was sure he could have beaten Malfoy, and he thought probably Ron could have as well. "Thank you, Mr. Malfoy, Professor Snape, for coming by." A very angry-looking Malfoy was led away by Snape.

People surrounded Neville, giving him their hearty congratulations; the Hufflepuffs looked as happy as the Gryffindors. Dumbledore walked up to Neville and handed him the candle. "Congratulations, Neville. You did excellently." Harry had never seen Neville looking happier. "Well, those long bouts took more time than I had expected, and now we are out of time," Dumbledore announced. "Thank you for your attention and effort. I will see you again next Friday."

Most people left, but a few hung back to look at the candle. "Strawberry!" said Neville, and almost immediately, Harry could smell strawberries in the air. Everyone was impressed. As they were packing up to go, Neville approached Hermione. "I was pretty sure I noticed before that you really wanted to get this," said Neville. "I didn't care about it that much, I just wanted to beat Malfoy. I'd like you to have it."

Hermione looked embarrassed. "Oh, Neville, I couldn't-"

"Please," Neville insisted. "I really want you to have it."

Hermione took it, looking at Neville with great affection. "Thank you very much, Neville. I'll always value this, especially because of the circumstances under which I got it." She leaned forward and kissed Neville on the cheek. Neville blushed furiously.

"Wow, Neville, it looks like she got you with the 'Red' spell," joked Ron, as everyone laughed, including Neville.

Harry patted Neville on the shoulder. "That was a really nice thing to do."

"You were going to give it to her too, Harry. I could tell," responded Neville.

"Yes, but you were the one who won," Harry said. "That must have been satisfying."

Neville just smiled, picked up his bag, and headed out as the rest followed.

The days got colder as winter approached, and as Christmas decorations went up, the atmosphere became more festive. The school had not forgotten the four who had died at Hogsmeade; among other reminders, their desks remained empty and unmoved in all their classes, including Harry's. Harry had stopped crying at night shortly after his talk with Dumbledore, but still missed them and was pained to think of them, especially when he saw their empty desks in the classes. But people also recognized that life had to go on, and they welcomed the holiday cheer.

Adding to the cheer was Malfoy's continued confinement, which was very good for the overall atmosphere. Pansy had told Harry that Malfoy's absence had an excellent effect on the Slytherin common room. Crabbe and Goyle, now rudderless, kept to themselves and were very quiet, as were others who had accepted Malfoy as their leader. The first years also reported that life in the common room was far better, and they felt that Malfoy's power was now sufficiently broken that he would be unable to make the common room his domain again after he got back. Pansy felt that they were probably right, and wished aloud that Malfoy's confinement would last until he graduated. Harry tried hard to restrain himself from again suggesting that she come out into the open.

Shortly after waking up on the last Friday before Christmas vacation started, Harry walked from his dormitory to the Great Hall. He took his usual seat opposite Ron and Hermione, next to Neville.

"So, Harry, are you leaving for your visit with the Aurors tomorrow?" asked Neville.

Harry nodded. "I leave tomorrow morning, and stay until Monday night, after which I go straight to the Burrow." He smiled at Ron. "You have to spend Christmas with family, after all."

Ron smiled back. "Mum'll be very happy to hear you say that."

"What will they be doing with you?" asked Neville.

"I'm not sure. I know they want me to work on the spell with them, since they still haven't got it yet. I'm not quite sure what else they have in mind. Cassandra's been a little vague about that."

"Cassandra Banks?" asked Neville, eyebrows raised. Harry nodded. "I know her," said Neville. "She's really nice. She was a close friend of my mother's, they became Aurors at about the same time. She visits my gran and I occasionally."

"Well, she seems very nice in letters," Harry agreed. "I'll be looking forward to meeting her, and I'll mention you to her."

"Have you heard from any others besides her?" asked Hermione.

"Just Tonks, last week. It was to confirm stuff about this weekend, but it seemed like mainly an excuse to tease me. She said something about trying to find some mistletoe," he said as the others laughed. "A few other things like that."

Hermione was still chuckling. "I wonder if she's just letting you know that she's going to have some fun with you while you're there. She's probably going to massively flirt with you."

"What should I do?" asked Harry apprehensively. Hermione barely managed not to roll her eyes.

"Enjoy it, Harry. Tease her back, flirt with her back. I think it's safe to say that the age difference is enough that she's not really serious, but it's also safe to say that she finds you at least somewhat attractive, or she wouldn't do it. You like her; just treat her like you would Ginny or I."

"Yeah, but you and Ginny don't flirt with me," Harry pointed out.

"Maybe we should, so you get used to it," she suggested, smiling mischievously.

"Oh, please don't," Harry pleaded, as Ron and Neville laughed. "I'm confused enough already about this sort of thing, I don't need to start wondering about you and Ginny."

"You'll be fine, Harry, trust me," she said earnestly. "Don't worry about it. Just have a sense of humor, you sometimes do."

The morning owls flew in, and a small box was dumped on Harry's part of the table, right next to his food. His first reaction was to wonder if the owl was deliberately trying to avoid hitting his food. He opened the box. "What is it?" asked Ron.

Harry read the letter attached to it first, then opened the smaller package inside the package. He handed Ron a Harry Potter Chocolate Frog card, saying, "According to the letter, these will be announced on the first of the year. I'd rather people around here didn't know about them until then."

Ron looked at the card. "Cool!" he enthused, as Hermione leaned over to take a look. "Good picture, Harry," she commented. Harry handed Neville a card so he could see. "Read the back, Ron!" said Hermione.

Ron turned it over and started reading. "Also known as the Boy Who Lived, Harry Potter at age one was the first ever to survive a Killing Curse, delivered by the evil Dark wizard Voldemort... they used his name?!" Ron exclaimed, agog, while still trying to keep his voice down. "It's not just the letter 'V' followed by eight dashes, they actually print the name! This is the first time I've ever seen the name in writing!"

Harry nodded. "That was my only condition for letting them make the card. No 'Dark Lord,' no 'You-Know-Who.' They had to use his name, in full. They weren't happy about it, but they were willing to do it. The person who wrote me back said, 'We have decided that if you can risk the Cruciatus Curse, the least we can do is print his name on a card.'"

Hermione smiled at him proudly. "Here's another good thing to come of what you did, Harry. This may seem small, but you inspired people in all sorts of ways. After what you went through, people aren't going to be angry at this sort of thing anymore; they'd be ashamed to be angry after you suffered what you did, for them."

Ron continued reading. "'Currently Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts at the age of sixteen, he braved the Cruciatus Curse for five nights against Voldemort before finding an amazing new shield which blocks the Curse. To date, only his mentor, Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, has mastered the spell. He is also the youngest wizard ever to be chosen as a companion by a phoenix.' Well, they don't have that much space, I suppose. Or they could have mentioned the Chamber of Secrets or the Sorcerer's Stone."

"Those events aren't as well known," Hermione pointed out. "They'd be a bit hard to explain on a card. How many did you have them send you, Harry?"

Harry looked somewhat embarrassed. "Fifty," he said.

"Fifty?" Ron exclaimed. "What are you going to do with fifty?"

Harry sighed. He wasn't looking forward to telling them this. "I'll tell you, but first you have to promise not to tease me about it." He didn't take his eyes off Ron.

"Why are you looking at me?" Ron asked, defensively.

Hermione looked at Ron as if he were being especially dense. "Because he knows Neville and I won't tease him about it, Ron."

"Well, how can I promise that if I don't know what it is?" asked Ron. Harry just kept looking at him. "Oh, all right," Ron finally conceded.

"This goes against my usual inclinations, which is probably why I'm sensitive about it," Harry said. "But I know they'll appreciate it. I'm going to sign and

personalize them-you know, like, 'to David,' then sign my name-and give them to all the first years as a Christmas present." Harry looked around for any mocking reactions.

Predictably, Hermione smiled. "Harry, that's so nice of you, they'll be thrilled. I don't think Ron would have teased you anyway, though. It's too close to something Malfoy would taunt you about. I assume that's why you're sensitive about it."

"I just don't like the way it sounds, like I'm so full of myself that I think handing out autographed cards of myself is such a good thing. I'm sure some people will think that after they find out. But I know the first years will like it, so I'm doing it anyway."

Ron looked disappointed. "C'mon, Harry, have a little more faith in me than that. There's plenty of things to have a go at you about without stooping to something that Malfoy would do. It is nice of you."

Harry was surprised; Ron didn't have to go quite that far, but he appreciated it. "Okay, Neville, what do you think?"

Neville did not respond; by way of answer, he held up the card, and proffered it to Harry, along with a pen, his eyes making a silent request. Ron and Hermione chuckled, and Harry smiled. He took them, and wrote, "Neville- thanks for your friendship." Then he signed it, and gave it back. "I could have written more, but these cards aren't very big."

Neville read the card, and smiled broadly. "That's just fine, Harry, thank you. I'm very happy to have gotten the first one."

Hermione had gotten out a pen. "That means I get the second," she said.

"I guess this is why I had them send fifty instead of forty," said Harry. "I didn't know if you guys would want them, but I wanted them just in case." He took the pen, thought for a minute, then wrote, "Hermione- I love you," then signed. She took the card, looked at it, and melted. "Oh, Harry... thank you..."

Looking uncertain, Ron said, "I want one too, but I want to know how you're going to sign it first."

Harry chuckled. "If you don't watch out, Ron, I'll sign it the same way I signed Hermione's." She showed hers to Ron, who groaned, then to Neville, who laughed. Harry thought for another minute, then wrote, 'Ron- thanks for Keeping me safe,' then signed, and handed it to Ron. "There you go, a Quidditch reference and everything."

Ron looked at it and smiled. "Thanks, Harry, that's good."

"So, except for the ones for the first years, you've got seven left," said Hermione. Assuming everyone wants one, I'm trying to figure out who'll get the rest. Let's see... Ginny, Pansy, Justin, Ernie, Hagrid... right?" Harry nodded. "That leaves

two more," she said. "Oh, Professor Dumbledore! He'd probably want one. Also, maybe Fred and George, they could share one. Sometimes it seems like they're the same person anyway."

"Ginny, I'll just give one, I have a feeling she'll want one," Harry said. "Pansy too, I just hope she's careful where she keeps it. Hagrid, maybe I'll ask him if he wants one. It wouldn't surprise me if he did. But Justin and Ernie, I'm too embarrassed to just ask them. If one of you wants to do it, you can, or if they ask after they come out, I'll give them one. I don't know about Professor Dumbledore."

"I think he'll want one, Harry. Mainly for sentimental reasons, and we all know how he feels about you," said Hermione.

"You may be right... thinking about people I'm close to, I can't help but think, Sirius would have gotten a big kick out of this, really enjoyed that I was on a card."

The others were somber. "Yes, he would've," agreed Hermione. "I can hear that laugh of his. And he would've told you that your father would've been proud, too. And I'm sure he would've been right."

Harry felt conflicting emotions, as he now often did when he thought of his father. Part of him felt proud, as Hermione had intended, but... before his last Occlumency lesson with Snape last year, whenever he thought of his father, in his mind's eye he saw the cheerful, happily married young man in the pictures Hagrid had collected for him. But now, he also saw an arrogant, vain fifteen-year-old being deliberately cruel. He knew that his father had changed and become a better person, but he still couldn't help but see that image, and feel a flash of the shame associated with it. He wondered if and when he would be able to set that aside.

He focused on the more positive image, and knew that as usual, Hermione was right. "Thanks," he said. "So, what are you doing for Christmas vacation? With your parents?"

"Yes, I don't think they have anything special planned," she said. "I'm sure I can make it over to the Burrow once or twice. My parents will understand."

"How about you, Neville?" asked Ron. "Do you think you can make it over at some point?"

Neville looked very pleased to have been asked; he had never been to the Weasleys' before. "I'm sure I can, anytime except Christmas day. Just let me know when you want me over."

Ron nodded. "Just so you know, it's not the most posh place in the world..."

Harry hated to think that Ron was embarrassed about his home, and said, "I think it's great. It's got lots of character."

Hermione agreed. "Really, Ron, do you think Neville's going to care about that? That's the kind of thing someone like Malfoy would go on about." Neville simply looked at Ron, but his meaning was clear: he didn't care what it looked like.

"All right, all right," Ron conceded. "Just making sure. I'll stick my head in the fireplace to let you know when's a good time to come, Neville."

"Too bad Pansy can't come," said Harry, making sure to keep his voice down, as they did whenever discussing Pansy. "That'd be nice for her, to be able to do something like that."

"How do you know she can't come?" asked Hermione.

"You can ask her if you want," said Ron. "You're a family member, remember, that means you can invite people, just like any of us."

"If I was like Tonks, I could make my hair red," Harry joked. "No, I was thinking she couldn't come because of security issues. She's suggested that she has more of a formal relationship with her parents, and she would either have to lie about where she was going or tell them but make sure they kept it a secret. Also, what if Malfoy sticks his head in her fireplace and asks where she is? There's just too many things that could go wrong. It seems too risky."

"But you don't know her home situation that well, Harry," Hermione pointed out. "You could be making wrong assumptions. Maybe you should ask her, and she can tell you whether it's possible or not."

Harry looked doubtful. "If I asked her that, she'd tell me it was possible without even considering security, she'd be so happy for the chance," he said. "She's not going to consider the risks in a way that I'd feel comfortable with."

"Isn't that her choice?" Hermione countered. "Harry, remember when you were stuck in Privet Drive for over a month, a year and a half ago? You were furious when you got out, we'd never seen you so angry. You were so isolated. You didn't care about security, you just wanted some friendly human contact. You were angry at Dumbledore for valuing your security over your happiness. Do you want to do the same thing to Pansy?"

Harry was silent for a moment, then looked at Hermione with annoyance. "I hate it when you're right," he said.

She gave an apologetic shrug. "I suppose you wouldn't care for some comment to the effect that now you know how Professor Dumbledore must have felt at the time."

Harry shook his head. "I'll mention it to her, see what she says. I'm meeting with her later today, so if anything's decided, I'll tell you tonight."

Eight hours later, he told Pansy about the conversation, finishing with, "I just wanted to admit that I considered not even suggesting it, but Hermione was right, it

wouldn't have been fair to you. So, if it can be managed safely, and if you want to, it would be great if you could."

She smiled. "It's nice of you, both to ask, and to admit what you almost did. But the answer is I can almost certainly come, and there are no security problems. I've long since been able to use the fireplace to go pretty much wherever I want, without having to account for where I go. And fortunately, I've never involved Malfoy in my home life. He's never been to my home, even had his head in my fireplace, nor mine in his. We haven't had any contact in the summer or during vacations, just at Hogwarts. So that'll be no problem. If my parents aren't in the living room, I can just say the name of the Weasleys' house and go straight there. If they stay in the living room for a long time, I can just go to Diagon Alley or someplace like that, and then go from there to the Weasleys'. Either way, it'll be fine. And I would be happy to. It would be nice to spend some time with the rest of you. I'll also be keen to hear about what you do with the Aurors."

"I'll be interested to know myself," he assured her. "Okay, then, the thing to do is to keep in contact with Hermione with the notebooks. It'll probably be between the day after Christmas and New Year's Day, so you can let Hermione know if any of those days are bad for you. And I'm glad you can come."

"So am I," she agreed. "It'll be really nice to do something like this. It's also nice that I've met the Weasleys and they know about me. Maybe I can get to know Ron and Neville a bit, too."

"Oh, that's right, you already know Ginny from spending time with her after Hogsmeade, right?"

"And talking to her with the notebooks," Pansy said. To Harry's surprised look, she said, "You didn't know about that? After Hogsmeade, Ginny asked Hermione if she could borrow the notebook a couple of times a week so she could talk to me, and we've been doing that ever since. We've gotten to know each other pretty well."

"No, I didn't know that, it's great," Harry said enthusiastically. "I'm glad that you're doing that. Hermione had a really good idea with the notebooks."

"And you were really good to pay for them," she said. Harry was startled. "Yes, she told me. It was very nice of you. She told me how much you get for being a teacher, so I didn't feel too bad. I know you can afford it. But it was still really nice."

"For me," he said, "it was nice to be able to use the money I have to do something like that. More than once I've wanted to buy Ron something really nice, but I know I shouldn't, because he can't reciprocate, and it makes him feel bad. I wish he didn't feel that way. It's funny... when I was growing up, I never had any money, because my Muggle relatives never gave me any. In the wizarding world,

because of what my parents left me, I've always had more than enough. But the thing I'd really like to do-do something nice for the Weasleys-I can't, because of how they'd feel about it. It's almost frustrating sometimes. So I was really happy to be able to pay for the notebooks; I felt like the money I had could do some good."

She chuckled. "I can understand that, but I can't help but think, first thing, that Malfoy would laugh at that sort of attitude. To him, money is a way to get power. And luxury, but mainly as a tool. You know how his father bought respectability and power after Voldemort's downfall, so that's how he looks at it. Given that, it's both nice and not surprising that you would look at money as a way of being good to people."

Harry shook his head. "I've never understood the appeal of power, not the way Malfoy and people like him see it. Maybe that's because I've always seen power from Professor Dumbledore's perspective. To him, power is responsibility, and you get it when people give it to you, not from trying to take it. He lost those posts a year and a half ago after Voldemort came back, but he didn't care. He was doing the right thing, and if people didn't want to give him responsibility while he was telling the truth about Voldemort coming back, then I think he just knew that that was the way it had to be. I've learned that the only kind of power worth having is when people give it to you, and trust you to do the right thing with it even when they disagree with you."

Pansy thought for a minute. "I guess you've had quite an education, spending as much time with him as you have. I had never thought of it like that. I just always assumed that power was something you tried to get so you could control things, make them be the way you wanted them."

"It seems to me that you have to persuade people of things, not try to make them do things. But I guess if you spend time with Malfoy, you would see it like that."

"I don't think it's just him," she said. "It seems to work that way with the Ministry too, from what I've seen."

"Maybe you're right," he allowed. "They seriously misused their power last year, I know that for sure. Not just what they did to me and Dumbledore in the Prophet, but just denying that Voldemort was back. That certainly put me off power, especially the idea of trying to have it. I can barely handle what I have... though I guess I wouldn't say that I have 'power,' it's more like 'influence.' All I care about is that I can help get people to say Voldemort's name, get people to fight him."

"And you have," she said, her pride obvious. "You got me saying it, and I never thought I could."

"You just did it because you felt sorry for me," he said lightly, recalling that she had done it when he was grieving for the Hogsmeade dead.

She looked at him in dismay and a little anger. "Is that what you think?" she asked. He gave her a kind of blank, 'what did I say?' look. Looking stern, she continued, "I did it because... when you were crying, what you were going through... I'd never seen anyone in that much pain. I had... I guess it's called an epiphany, I suddenly realized what you've taken on your shoulders. Not only the risk to you and your friends, but the risk that's indirectly there based on what you do. I could feel your despair, how responsible you felt, and I realized that this was something you risked to get people to say Voldemort's name, and how important it was to do it, that you would risk both the Cruciatus Curse and the emotional pain of people dying like that. When I saw that, I knew that saying his name was minor compared to that, and I said his name to let you know that I understood that. I was supporting you, not feeling sorry for you."

Harry looked down for a few seconds. Then he looked up and said, "I'm sorry. That was a stupid thing to say. I took something that was hard for you, and made it sound like it wasn't important. Sometimes I say things without thinking about them very well, and this was one of them. I guess I just automatically try to minimize it when someone compliments me like you did, acting like it was just you being nice instead of something I did. But I'm really sorry."

She nodded. "I understand. I suppose I've done things like that before. Not to mention years of doing really bad things. I have no business chastising you."

"C'mon, Pansy, you can't keep beating yourself up with that. Not only that, but that has nothing to do with this. You have every right to be upset with me if I say something thoughtless, or even if it's not thoughtless but just upsets you. Your past doesn't take away your right to have your feelings, or to say what they are."

She thought for a few seconds. "You reflexively put yourself down by minimizing your accomplishments, and I do it by bringing up my past. At least we have something in common."

He nodded, recognizing the similarity. "Looks like you're right. Maybe we can both try to work on it. It won't surprise you to know that Hermione's criticized me for excessive modesty more than once, and so has Professor Dumbledore. And, by the way... when you said his name, that night I woke up, I knew it was support. Even in my grief, I knew, and I appreciated it. I just couldn't say it right then. Couldn't do much of anything right then. But I knew."

"I'm glad, Harry. I'm glad you knew that." They were both silent for a moment. Then Pansy said, "Do you think we should finish it up for today, or was there anything else you wanted to talk about?"

"Actually, there is one thing... I'm curious, do you, or did you ever, collect Chocolate Frog cards?"

She shrugged. "Not really... I looked at them, and I might have kept some of them, but I never really collected them. Why?"

"I figured... I think collecting them is more of a thing that boys do than girls. Hermione never did either, but Ron and Neville did. Anyway, there's one that I thought might interest you." He took a card from under his robes and handed it to her.

She looked at it, and gaped as much as Ron and Neville had. She was speechless. "I suppose I shouldn't say anything that minimizes my accomplishments," he joked. "They asked me last month if they could do it. I didn't want to, but Hermione and Professor Dumbledore persuaded me that it was a good idea. So I asked for some extras. You're welcome to keep that one if you want."

She finally found words. "Harry, this is amazing... not compared to what you've done, of course, but it really says something. You deserve it for everything you've done, of course, but this is a serious kind of recognition. I'm glad they persuaded you to overcome your modesty and agree to it. This is great."

"There was one thing I insisted on. Turn it over and read it." She did, and gaped again. "There was no way I was going to agree to a Harry Potter card that said 'You-Know-Who' on the back of it."

"I see what you mean, it would be kind of silly. Still, this is amazing... of course, I want to keep it, Harry. But I was wondering if you would sign it for me, too."

"Normally I'd be too embarrassed to," he admitted. "Even without Malfoy's acting like I love the attention I get, seeing Lockhart in second year made me never want to sign an autograph, ever." She chuckled, remembering Lockhart's vanity. "But I sort of understand that it makes people happy, so I'll deal with it." She handed him the card and a pen, and he thought for a minute. "Well," he said with a casual air, "I'm not good at thinking of original things to say, so I'm just going to sign yours like I signed Hermione's and Ginny's. It's easy enough, since it's true." He finished signing, and handed the card and the pen back to her.

She looked at it, then looked at him, already near tears, as if seeking confirmation of what he had written. He kept his eyes on hers. She stood up and walked to him; he stood too as she wrapped him in her arms. They held each other gently as tears rolled down her cheeks. "You know, Harry," she finally said, "this is the first time I've ever cried because I was happy. My first thought was that I don't deserve this, I don't deserve to have you feel that way about me. But I realized that it's a thought I shouldn't have. So my next thought," she said, now looking into his eyes, "is that I love you, too." She kissed him on the cheek, then held him again. "Thank you, Harry, thank you so much..." After a minute had passed, she said, "I'm sorry, I can't seem to let go of you."

He laughed, gently squeezing her shoulders. "It's all right, I've got my eyes on the map. You can hold on for as long as you want. Seems like I don't mind."

She chuckled. "I think I'm holding on because... I feel like I'm holding onto love, kind of. My father has never said he loved me. My mother has, but rarely, and in a kind of perfunctory way. Not like she really meant it, not with emotion. You really mean it, I can tell in your eyes. It's so wonderful, you've made me so happy." She stepped back a bit, her hands still on his shoulders. "Did Ginny and Hermione react this way when you gave them their cards?"

He smiled. "Not quite... Ginny hugged and kissed me, like you did; Hermione didn't, I think because we were in the Great Hall. I think she would have. But they didn't have as strong a reaction as you did, because they had already told me that, and I had told them. They knew it already. But since I had never told you I loved you before... it's funny, I never could have done this last year. I would have been mortified. It's just because of Professor Dumbledore, helping me access the love I felt, and Hermione..." He told her about the conversation they'd had after talking with John about Dumbledore and the golden dog. "She was the first person who ever told me she loved me. It was... like you said about me a few months ago, like hearing music for the first time. I couldn't believe how good it felt. So I think I know how you feel. Just keep in mind... you do deserve it. I didn't decide to feel this way about you, I just do. So it must be that you deserve it. Also, I want you to know... you're just as important to me as my other friends."

She gave him a final squeeze, and released him. "That means a lot to me, Harry, because I know what they mean to you. Thank you for the card. I'll always treasure it." She paused. "You know what I should also thank you for... you were afraid that I would fall in love with you. Telling me something like this could only encourage that, but you did it anyway, because you wanted me to know. You could easily have avoided it. Thank you for not doing that."

"I'd be lying if I said the thought never popped into my head," he admitted. "But I didn't think about it for very long. It would really be unfair to you to do that. Something like this, it's important. Someone's coming," he interrupted himself, leaning over for a closer look at the map. "Oh, it's Justin, it's okay. I told you he knows about you, right?" She nodded. Justin knocked on the door. "Come in," Harry said

Justin entered, doing a slight double-take upon seeing Pansy. "Hi, Justin," she said. "I'd like you to meet the new, better Pansy Parkinson. And I hope you'll forgive the old one for all the stupid stuff she did."

Justin smiled. "Harry's told me what you're doing, Pansy. I really admire you for it. It must be very difficult." Pansy blushed.

"It is," agreed Harry. "I admire her too." He put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed to emphasize the point. She beamed, and blushed harder as Justin chuckled. "You've really changed since last year, Harry," he said. "Must be all that love. Guess you need a lot of love to beat Voldemort."

"He certainly has that," agreed Pansy, who to Harry's surprise stepped towards Justin and showed him the card. Justin grinned. To Harry's expression, she said, "Well, I want to show it to somebody. I'm proud of it."

"That seems to be common," Justin said. "Hermione showed me hers, too. Well, she showed both Ernie and I, so we could see the card. You should have seen Ernie's face. Hermione was like, 'no, he means a friendship kind of love, don't get that started again.' She obviously has a sore spot about those Rita Skeeter articles."

"I don't blame her," said Pansy, as Harry nodded.

"Ernie was okay after that. To tell you the truth," Justin said, lowering his voice, "I think he kind of fancies her. I know they spend time together in the library, and just the way he talks when she comes up... I could be wrong, it's just a feeling. I know he really respects her intellect. You wouldn't know if she maybe fancies him, would you?"

Harry shook his head. "Whoever she may fancy, if anyone, she hasn't mentioned it to me." He glanced at Pansy, who also shook her head. "If we're right about them being Head Boy and Girl next year, they'll have plenty of time to spend together, though."

"Anyway, Harry," said Justin, "Hermione said you'd give me a card, but that you were too embarrassed to just come up and offer it. So here I am."

"It just seems like too much," he said. "Like..."

"Like something Malfoy would get on you about, I know. She told us why, and I can understand it. I know you hate to be like 'look at me, I'm Harry Potter,' especially after those articles last year. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone."

"Well, they'll find out after the New Year, anyway, it'll be all over the school..." Harry told them what he planned to do with the first years; Justin and Pansy both grinned. "That's so nice of you, Harry," she said. "They'll love it."

Justin nodded. "My brother'll go bananas. I can see it already, he'll run around showing it to everyone, he'll bother people on the street he doesn't know and show them. No matter what my parents get for him, that'll be his favorite gift."

"Be sure you don't tell him, or anyone else," Harry cautioned. "I want it to be a surprise, and if one first year knows..."

"All the others will know within five minutes," Justin finished. "I understand, I'll keep it under my hat. Hermione already told us to keep it secret, but she didn't say why, exactly. You must be proud, Harry. It's an incredible honor."

"Honestly, I've been too embarrassed to be proud, but I suppose you're right. You should have seen me when I got the letter telling me about it. I felt a little bit like I felt when I got that scroll."

Justin laughed. "Oh, yes, that was great. You'll be hearing about that for as long as you live, I'll bet. Anyway, I'd like my card signed too, if you don't mind."

Pansy took out the pen she'd given him and handed it over. Harry fished another card out of his robes. As he signed it, he told them how he'd threatened Ron about signing his, causing them both to laugh. Harry wrote, 'Justin- thank you for saving my life,' then signed it and handed it to Justin, who smiled again as he read it. "It was my pleasure, Harry. Hell, it already made me a hero to my brother. He was so proud of me, it was hard for him not to tell our parents."

"So, Ernie didn't want a card?" Harry asked.

"He said he didn't, but I think he does," said Justin. "Hermione told us that you were too embarrassed to ask us if we wanted one; I think Ernie's too embarrassed to come and ask for one. I think if you signed one for him and I brought it to him, he'd be pretty happy."

Harry nodded. "Well, since I was too embarrassed to offer, I can't blame him for being too embarrassed to ask. Of course, I'll be happy to." He paused. "You know, Justin, I'd like to sign his the same way I signed yours. He saved my life too. I'm just a bit concerned that if I do-

"It'll remind him about how he felt because he didn't join, I know," Justin agreed. "But I agree, he does deserve it. Look, go ahead and do it anyway. I'll make sure he understands that you're serious, how you mean it. I want him to be able to show it to his kids someday, like I will mine." Harry took out another card and signed it the same way. "Thanks," said Justin. "I'm sure that when they come out, my brother will be buying more. He's going to want extras, he collects them anyway."

"Well, he'd better do it soon, then," Harry said. "The Chocolate Frog people told me in the letter that they're going to have a special promotion for it. Just for the month of January, one in every twenty Chocolate Frogs will contain my card. After that, it goes back to the usual chances, which I guess is one in a few hundred or something. So he should get them soon if he's going to."

"I have a feeling he's going to be in Diagon Alley the first day they're out, with all the Galleons he can get his hands on. And I bet he won't be the only one, either. It should be interesting to see what happens."

"One thing I know will happen," said Pansy, "is that the first day back after vacation, in your class, your first years will be so busy thanking you that it'll be hard to teach. Then, the next day, the second years will ask why they didn't get them."

Harry couldn't help but nod at the truth of it. "I thought of that, but I couldn't reasonably ask for three hundred cards. I guess I'll just tell them the truth, that I thought the first years would appreciate it more. If they get the card, I'll sign it for them, is the best I can do." He paused. "You know, it's funny... four months ago, I was really scared of being a teacher, I was just hoping I wouldn't do too badly. It still amazes me that I'm thought of the way I am."

"Well, it amazes us that you did something spectacular, Harry. You should try to enjoy it once in a while. You deserve it."

"Thanks, Justin. I manage to occasionally."

"Harry, I should go," said Pansy. She looked at the map. "We were finished anyway, and of course we can't leave at the same time. I'll go now, and you and Justin can leave in a few minutes."

"Okay. Hermione'll let you know when to come. I hope you can, I'm looking forward to it."

"Me too," she said eagerly. She put the card in a pocket in her robes. "Thank you so much, Harry. See you, Justin." She gave them a wave and walked out into the classroom.

After a few seconds' silence, Justin said, "Now, that is one happy girl."

Harry nodded, happy that he'd made her so happy. "It's amazing how close we've gotten in such a short time." He explained briefly that they met once or twice a week, and why. "So, she basically has no one to talk to," he concluded. "That's why she's so happy to see me."

Justin grinned, and Harry knew why he was before he said anything. "Something tells me that's not the only reason," he said wryly. "So, you and she aren't..."

Harry shook his head. "Nope. Scroll or no scroll, I'm still too chicken."

"I bet there's some people who'd argue with that," countered Justin, "but just for the sake of discussion, suppose there was no danger..." He looked at Harry questioningly.

Harry's impulse was to avoid the question, but then he remembered that Justin had saved his life, so he supposed Justin should be able to ask that kind of question if he wanted to. Harry thought for a few seconds. "Honestly, I'm not sure. I like her a lot, but I really try not to think about that. I feel like I'd just be torturing myself, thinking about something I can't have, and I don't see the point. I see her like I see Ginny and Hermione, that's all I can really say." He saw Justin looking at him with sympathy, like Hugo had when he'd asked Harry the question in September.

Justin nodded. "I guess I can see why you feel that way." He paused. "Funny, you have a phoenix, a Chocolate Frog card, good friends, and the first years love you... but I'm still not sure I'd want to be you."

"I'm not sure either, Justin," he answered, half-seriously. "Guess I'm stuck with it."

The next morning, Harry woke up at 7:30, a bit later than usual, but well in time to be ready to leave at 9:00, the time suggested by Cassandra in her last letter. He said goodbye to Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville, and met Professor McGonagall at the entrance to the castle. He carried his trunk, again bewitched to weigh almost nothing, behind him. They walked together to the Hogwarts gates and out into Hogsmeade.

Harry sighed as they walked down the main street in Hogsmeade toward the Owl Post Office. Responding to McGonagall's inquiring look, he said, "I was just thinking, I doubt I'll ever be able to look at this place in the same way I used to."

She regarded him sympathetically. "Such associations do fade, but they never leave us entirely," she agreed. "There are several sites in London which I will always associate with attacks perpetrated by Voldemort about sixteen years ago in which I lost friends, friends with whom I was as close as you are with yours."

He nodded somberly. "I can really understand that," he said. "I'm sure I'll always feel that way about the Department of Mysteries, not that I'll have that much reason to go there in the future. Probably just as well, I might end up walking through that veil."

"Which is one of the reasons that room is so inaccessible," she said. "Like Hogwarts, it does not permit Apparation or Disapparation. The closest to it that one can Apparate is the Atrium near the entrance. Which, I suppose, has its own associations for you as well." To his great surprise, she took his hand for a few seconds, squeezed it, then released it. He looked at her with an expression of appreciation, but said nothing.

"Harry... you don't have to answer this if you don't want to, but... why did you show us that fourth dream as you did? You could have arranged with Professor Dumbledore for it to be edited. It was so highly personal, I felt as though I were intruding."

He shrugged. "I didn't really think about it. With what was going on, I was totally focused on getting Voldemort out of my dreams, and I thought any little clue could be important. All of my friends already knew what had happened, so it wasn't an issue with them. The only one I thought twice about was Professor Snape, and if his attitude towards me hadn't changed this year, I might have seriously considered

it. But now... I guess I thought of it like taking off your clothes when you go to the doctor. He was there because it was important that he be there. As for you... I don't know, I just didn't mind. You know how I feel about you, Professor." He almost held back saying the last sentence, but decided to anyway; her support during the Voldemort trial had meant a lot to him, and he had come to understand that her true personality was rather different than the one she showed students.

She raised an eyebrow, as if in great doubt. "In that case, why is it that I did not get a card?" She smiled a little as Harry burst out laughing. More seriously, she said, "Yes, I do know, Harry. And thank you."

"It never occurred to me that you'd want one," he said, though he knew she had almost certainly been joking. "And it isn't just me that feels that way. Especially Hermione."

"I have always considered her something of a kindred spirit," McGonagall said. "I confess to having raised my hand more than my share of times as a student. And I was Head Girl, as she no doubt will be. I find myself hoping that she will apply for a position on the teaching staff in the future, when one comes up."

Harry was a little surprised. "What subject?"

She gave him a knowing look. "Can you think of a subject she would not be qualified to teach?"

"Good point," he agreed. "No, wait a minute, there's Divination."

She didn't quite roll her eyes, but seemed to almost do it. "Yes, and I would say that speaks well of Hermione." Harry grinned. "Nothing personal about Sybil Trelawney, who I'm sure is a lovely person once you get to know her, but I admit I have always considered Professor Dumbledore's decision to continue the subject of Divination to be similar to his allowing Peeves the run of the castle."

Harry laughed and shook his head. "Boy, was that subject a complete waste of time. I would've taken Muggle Studies if I'd known, or if I'd known John. It didn't take Ron and I long to just start making stuff up. The more violent and awful we made it, the better she liked it. And she loved to predict my death. She must have done it a few dozen times in three years."

"Unfortunately, on quite a few occasions, she has been nearly right. But for your friends..."

If she had planned to finish the thought, she never got a chance, as they were met by a taller-than-average, slightly plump witch with medium-length dark hair. Harry couldn't guess her age, but he felt as though she was the same age his parents would be if they were still alive. She smiled at McGonagall. "Professor, it's nice to

see you again. You look very well." Turning to Harry, she said to McGonagall, "And who is your handsome young companion?"

Harry and McGonagall both laughed. "Sometimes I wish," he said, "that someone could ask me that and really need to be told."

"Fame probably seems a lot more appealing if you're not already famous," Cassandra agreed. "But I'm afraid there's no chance of that happening to you, Harry. Especially now, with these floating around." She reached into her robes and pulled out a Harry Potter Chocolate Frog card.

McGonagall reached out to take it as Harry raised his eyebrows. "How did you get that? I only got them yesterday."

Her answer was cut off by McGonagall's exclamation of surprise on reading the back of the card. "Harry, did they offer to do this, or did you demand it?"

"The latter," he said. "Anything else would have looked stupid."

"A good use of your fame, to advance your cause," agreed Cassandra. "But to answer your question, Aurors have lots of connections. Fortunately, being an Auror is a very honored position, and people are often happy to do things for us. Many of us were interested, Tonks in particular."

Harry smiled, and quickly explained to McGonagall how Tonks had been acting. "She's been having fun with me ever since the article."

"I don't know, Harry," said Cassandra, a little more serious now. "I'm sure she is to an extent, but I think at the same time she is a bit smitten with you. She knows you're too young, but I think she is anyway. I mean, what you said in that article, you were practically waving a red flag in the face of any girl in your age range."

Harry shook his head. "See, this is how little I know about women. I thought it would discourage them."

Cassandra's face took on a motherly look. "That you know little about women was also shown by the fact that you said it in the first place. It was so obviously wrong, which the girls at Hogwarts told you in that scroll. Nobody who had ever been in love, Harry, would have said what you said. But I know that you're trying to avoid the pain and the worry, and it's understandable. We all feel for you."

Harry sighed. "One of these days, I'll forgive Hugo for asking that question. You must be right, since everyone has said the same thing. But there's not much I can say until it happens."

"Well, I should let you take him back," said McGonagall. "Cassandra, it was good to see you again. Harry, have a good vacation." She nodded goodbye, then turned to walk back down the street toward Hogwarts.

Cassandra took his arm lightly and steered him towards the Owl Post Office. "Harry, I'm sorry. Here I just met you, and I'm taking liberties like that. I know that can't be an easy topic for you."

Harry waved off her apology. "Really, it's all right. I feel like I know you already, from your letters. I know you're trying to help. Also, Neville speaks highly of you."

"I'm glad. Neville's a very nice boy. What happened to his parents was a terrible wound to the Auror community. They were young, very well liked, very good people. I assume he's told you that I was good friends with Alice?" Harry nodded. "You and he have a lot in common, Harry. Both lost your parents very young, born at the same time."

You'd really think so if you knew the prophecy, thought Harry. He said, "I think he got the worst of it. At least with my parents, it was fast. I can't imagine the number of times he must have thought about how it was for them. I've sometimes wondered if that was why he was so shy."

"It could be," she said, "but I kind of think shyness is something you're born with. But I noticed you used the past tense. He did seem different the last time I was there, and his grandmother mentioned it as well. She said she thought being in your group had something to do with it." She paused, her face turning grim as they walked into the room with the fireplace in the Owl Post Office. "She also said that Lestrage tortured him in the Department of Mysteries."

"He ran into a room, with a broken nose and bleeding, where ten Death Eaters had me cornered," Harry confirmed. "I saw her do it. She's just... evil. Unbalanced and evil."

"I've never killed, Harry," she said quietly as they stopped in front of the fireplace. "There were times when I could have, and I would have been excused, but I never did. But I think I could kill her if she were standing in front of me... I suppose you can understand that. You showed us those dream encounters with Voldemort, even that one where he taunted you with your memories. I think you might have killed her if you knew how, if you could have. Nobody would have blamed you."

"I'm just as glad I didn't know how. I really don't want to do that. But I can really see how you feel. She certainly deserves whatever she gets."

Neither said anything for a moment. Then she said, "Well, enough of this cheery talk, Harry. Let's get a move on. We've had you authorized, of course, so don't worry. Just say 'Auror Training Center.'"

He did so as he threw some powder into the fire, and stepped in. In a second, he was in a large living room, nicely decorated and with a number of chairs and a few large sofas. He took a step out and saw six people get up to greet him.

Kingsley Shacklebolt reached him first, and shook his hand warmly. "Harry, good to see you again," he said as Cassandra appeared in the fireplace behind him. "We're glad you could come."

"I'm glad you'll have me. I've been looking forward to spending time with all of you." He suddenly decided to take Hermione's advice as he saw Tonks approach. "Especially Tonks," he added, as he smiled at her.

All the Aurors in the room laughed, as Harry realized that everyone must know about her attitude towards him. "That's it, Harry, get into the spirit of the thing," chuckled Kingsley.

Tonks looked at Harry suspiciously. Then she smiled, and walked up to him and kissed him on the cheek. She looked a bit surprised when he showed no signs of embarrassment. "So, what made you take this attitude?" she asked.

"I'll admit I was a bit concerned," he said, smiling. "But Hermione told me to just enjoy it. I figure if I can keep focused on love near Voldemort, I can deal with you having a bit of fun with me."

"If you can keep focused on love near Voldemort, Harry, most of us would assume you can do just about anything," said a wiry wizard with light brown hair, about Harry's height. "We haven't met, I wasn't around for your presentation in September. Jack Temble, nice to meet you."

"You too," said Harry, shaking his hand.

The others approached him. "Steve Janus, we met in September, but just briefly; with all those people, I wouldn't expect you to remember." Steve was a little tall with short black hair, a cleft chin, and a friendly expression. Two others, named Joan Wilson and Winston Clark, introduced themselves as well. Harry vaguely recalled the faces from September, but not the names. To Clark, he said, "It's funny, I have a first year with the last name of Clark. I wouldn't assume you're related, though, since Clark is a common name."

"You mean Helen? No, she's my daughter," said Clark, surprising Harry. "Actually, Clark isn't a common name in the wizarding world. My father was Muggle-born. But yes, you've been an important topic in many of the owls she's sent. She told my wife and I all about what happened. We were proud of her, and of you for what you taught her and the other first years."

"I was really proud of her," Harry said sincerely. "She was really brave. She'd just gotten to the place, knew little about it, but helped organize resistance to the

neighborhood bully. She also understood, faster than the others, why I had to take on Voldemort, no matter what."

"She learned what you taught her, Harry, first with words and then by your example. Not to take anything away from her; you're right, she was very brave. But she couldn't have done it without you. I'll admit that I was wondering what Dumbledore was doing, making a sixteen-year-old the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. But after the first week of owls, I wondered no more. And after the Voldemort thing, I wondered why you weren't made Minister of Magic by acclamation." The others laughed as Harry smiled in embarrassment.

"See, isn't he cute?" said Tonks. "He's been praised and complimented who knows how many times, and he still gets embarrassed so easily."

He looked at her in playful annoyance, but answered Clark. "I wondered what he was doing at first, too. I was stunned. I really didn't want to do it, I was afraid I'd fail. But you probably know, it's very difficult to say no to Professor Dumbledore."

Kingsley nodded. "The man's done so much, he has such great moral authority. But you know, Harry, and not to embarrass you more, but you now have quite a bit of moral authority as well. What you were willing to endure to say his name was a more difficult trial than any of us will ever have to face, almost certainly. What you did means that when you speak, people will pay attention and respect it. Your crusade might have created a huge backlash, normally. People would have let their fears run rampant, and criticized you for stirring up Voldemort while sitting there safe at Hogwarts. But when people heard what you did, they either said his name because you inspired them to, or because they were ashamed not to. Either way, it worked."

Harry shook his head in wonder. "And the funny thing is, Voldemort made it worse than it would have been if he'd just left me alone. I guess being as powerful as he is can make you overconfident. I'm sure it never occurred to him that he could lose the fight he started."

"Why shouldn't he think that way? He's Voldemort, after all," said Tonks. "Except for when he tried to kill you as a baby, he hadn't lost a fight for a long time. So, naturally, he's going to be looking for any chance to get you. Which is one of the reasons we wanted you here."

"Why is that?" he asked, confused. "I thought you wanted me here to work on the spell some more."

"No, I don't think anyone actually said that," said Cassandra. "I mean, I'm sure we'll ask you some more questions, but that's not the reason we wanted you here. We want to give you some extra training, teach you some more stuff."

Kingsley nodded. "Harry, you're going to be facing him again. It's bound to happen. We want you to have the best shot you can against him, and the Death Eaters. There are things you need to be able to do."

"Like what?" Harry asked.

"For one, to Apparate. That's the first thing we're going to work on."

"But I'm--"

"Not seventeen yet, we know," said Tonks.

"I mentioned before, Harry, that being an Auror is an honored position," said Cassandra. "We get a pretty substantial amount of license from the Ministry. If we ask for something, and it's not outrageously expensive or morally questionable, we tend to get it."

"Unfortunately, Cassandra, these days it's the politically rather than morally questionable that tends to be a problem. Harry knows, he was harassed politically most of last year," said Kingsley.

"Well, anyway," continued Cassandra, "we applied for, and were given, special dispensation for you. You can now legally Apparate, and you will continue to be able to do so; it's not just for this weekend. Also, the dispensation is not only for Apparation, but for everything to do with your being underage. You could be in a highly dangerous situation anytime, and we don't want you having to stop and think about whether you were justified or not, what trouble you might get in. You deserve it, considering what you've done, and the danger you're in. As of now, for legal purposes, you are of age. You are authorized to do anything an adult wizard can do."

Harry didn't quite know what to say; this was the last thing he had expected. "Thank you," he said. "I really appreciate that you've done this."

She shook her head dismissively. "Like I said, you absolutely deserve it. Also, we need you, and the ability to Disapparate could save your life. We feel it's serious."

"But not too serious for a little wagering," grinned Tonks.

To Harry's questioning look, Temble said, "Many of us like to bet on things, probably more than most people do. We think it's a result of high-stress jobs. We often bet on things that are hard to predict, but not totally random. A few people decided to start a betting pool on how long it'll take you to learn to Apparate for the first time. Ten of us, ten Galleons each, so whoever's closest gets a hundred Galleons."

Harry couldn't help but find this amusing. "So, who picked the fastest time?"

"We don't know," said Cassandra. "We only know what we picked, we don't get to find out what everyone picked until the event in question happens. Just so you know that if someone seems especially keen for you to get it in the next few minutes, it means that the time they picked is almost there."

"What's the average time it takes a person to do it for the first time?"

"About two hours," she said. "I think it's safe to say that we all picked some time under that."

"No pressure, though," added Tonks, with a mischievous grin.

"Okay, well, I'm ready to start anytime. I've really been looking forward to learning this."

"Hmmm... what time is it... nineteen after nine, okay," muttered Kingsley. "The interesting thing about Apparation, Harry, is that there really isn't that much to learn. It's just a matter of trying until you get it right, as is the case with a lot of spells. When you're trying to work it out in the beginning, the key is visualization. Imagine yourself in the place you want to end up, and simply will it to happen. Your success will be determined by the strength of your visualization."

"Let's give it a first try. I want you to try to Apparate to the other side of this room. See that painting over there on the opposite wall? Try to Apparate so that you'll be standing in front of that painting. Focus on that spot. Imagine you're already there. Just decide to be there, and know that you will. We'll be quiet, and just do it when you're ready."

Harry felt that he could do this. He had, after all, unintentionally Disapparated once even before he knew he was a wizard, so he knew he had the ability. Even though it wasn't a part of Kingsley's instructions, Harry found himself focusing on love. He realized he had just gotten into the habit of doing that whenever he needed to focus, to concentrate. He thought of Hermione, of Pansy. He felt relaxed, and wanted to take a look at the painting. He decided he was there already...

...and suddenly he was standing a few feet in front of it. He turned in surprise. Six of the Aurors looked surprised as well, as Tonks shouted, "Harry! Yes!" and grinned broadly.

"I take it you said he would do it on his first try," said Cassandra with amusement, as Temble picked up a sealed envelope and opened it, looking through pieces of paper.

"Hmmm... Nope, the other guesses ranged from four minutes to a little over an hour, but Tonks was the only one who said he'd do it on the first try. Quite a longshot there, Tonks," said Temble.

Just for fun, Harry Apparated back to where he had been standing before; all of a sudden, it wasn't that difficult. He was sure he could do it anywhere. "How often do people do it on the first try?"

"Does anyone know of anyone who has?" asked Kingsley. Everyone shook their head. "The people at the Apparation Test Center would know better than us, but

we're sure it's really rare. Tonks did go out on quite a limb there; I'd say she deserves the Galleons."

Cassandra looked annoyed. "I was the one who picked four minutes, I thought nobody would go lower than that. Oh, well."

"That was very impressive, Harry," said Kingsley. "I'm just wondering, if you had to guess, why would you say that you were able to do that, considering that it's very rare to do it on the first try?"

Harry thought for a minute. "Well, you said it's all about visualization, and visualization has a lot to do with focus. Since my life and sanity have depended on being able to focus completely, I'm probably able to do it better than pretty much any other sixteen-year-old. Also, I came up with the shield by visualizing it, so I have experience using that. That's just a guess, though."

Kingsley nodded. "I think it's a very good guess. That's what I had thought as well. So now, we refine it, make sure you understand how to do it over all kinds of areas. You can Apparate to anyplace on the planet, you don't have to have been there to do it. If you've never been there, of course, it helps to look at maps to get a fix on where you want to go, otherwise you could end up pretty far from it. It's impossible to Apparate into a solid object; if you tried, you'd just end up at the closest possible spot to the object."

"So, if I decided I wanted to Apparate in the Sahara Desert, I could do it? Even if I didn't know exactly where it was?"

Kingsley shook his head. "You have to at least have a general idea of where it is. So if you know that it's in Northern Africa, that's enough. You could end up anywhere in the desert if you're not any more specific than that about your destination."

"Sorry, but I have to try this." Harry focused his intentions, and the next thing he knew, he was standing in a desert. He could see nothing but sand and clear blue sky, not even sand dunes. It was very hot, which didn't surprise Harry, even though in England it was almost winter. It occurred to him that nobody would live long where he was. He picked up a small handful of sand, focused his thoughts, and was back in the living room at the Auror Training Center. He held out his hand, but didn't spill the sand onto the floor.

Kingsley looked amused. "Almost everyone goes someplace like that as soon as they know they can. It's quite a novelty at first. I went to Antarctica, which I quickly realized was a bad idea. Wizard robes don't keep you very warm."

"I have a question," said Harry. "Well, probably I'll have a lot of questions, but just for now... can you follow someone who's Disapparated? Is there any way to know where they've gone?"

"Unfortunately, no, Harry. It would make our jobs much easier if we could, that's for sure. But there's just no way to do it. I assume the thrust of your question is, if Aurors' jobs are to capture Dark wizards, can we follow them, track them down." Harry nodded. "No, the best we can do is catch them in an anti-Disapparation field. They always have a slight advantage over us because when we find them, that's the first thing we have to do. It's a little bit like, if we were playing chess, we have the black pieces."

"And even that doesn't always work," added Cassandra. "An anti-Disapparation field can be overcome, if the wizard is powerful enough. It often comes down to who is the stronger wizard. If who we're chasing is stronger than we are, they get away. It's that simple. That's why only the strongest wizards can become Aurors."

"That's also why Voldemort is so hard to catch," said Kingsley. "Even if five or ten of us surrounded him and started firing off spells and anti-Disapparation fields, he could still get away. The only one who would have a chance is Professor Dumbledore, and we don't even know for sure how that would go."

"Getting back to Apparation, some people use longitude and latitude to more closely determine where to go. If you have a head for figures, it's not a bad idea. But most wizards get by fine without it. It seems like you're pretty well in tune with your intuition, so I wouldn't worry about it if I were you."

"Okay, here's an odd question," Harry said. "If you were falling, and while falling you Disapparated-"

"Would you still have the downward momentum?" finished Kingsley. "It's not that odd a question, many people ask it. The answer is yes; you can't save yourself from a fall by Disapparating. If you Apparated on the ground, you would hit it with the force that you were falling with. Now, if you're falling, you can always Apparate higher up in the air, buy yourself more time, and you could keep doing it indefinitely if you didn't need to eat and sleep. In your case, of course, you don't have to worry since you have Fawkes. He can always catch you."

"That reminds me, did you hear exactly how Professor Dumbledore saved me after I was Cursed off my broom, on the morning after the second dream?" The Aurors shook their heads, and Harry told them the story. They were impressed, but not surprised. "Well, that's Dumbledore," said Kingsley. "It's possible that a few of us could have managed that, if we had a phoenix, but it would be tough."

"Oh, that reminds me of another thing," said Harry. "Last year when Dumbledore saved me in the Atrium-he seems to be doing a lot of that lately-he saved me from a Killing Curse by Voldemort by moving a large object in front of it, to shield me from it. He also moved two other things at the same time. Is that something you Aurors do a lot?"

Kingsley nodded. "There are some of us who are still alive today because we did that; it's pretty well recognized as the only thing you can do with a Killing Curse if you can't get out of the way. The problem is, it has to be pretty substantial, it can't just be a piece of wood. I take it you'd like to be able to do that?"

Harry nodded. "But I also have a question. Why can't you get out of the way of a Killing Curse by Disapparating instead of using objects to block it?"

"You can, sometimes," answered Kingsley. "The problem is, you can't know that your adversary hasn't already put an anti-Disapparation field around you, and when a Killing Curse is on the way is no time to find out. You only have time to do one thing, and if you try to Disapparate and fail, you're dead. If you have an object you can block it with, that's the thing to do. One thing Aurors are trained to do is in every situation, take a quick mental inventory of what's around, you have to be able to do it almost without thinking. Disapparating is a last, desperate resort.

"Anyway, moving objects is not that difficult, just for one thing. The trick is doing two or three at once. It takes a certain amount of concentration. We can work with you on that a bit, if you like. I don't think it would take long. It'll help that you can do it silently, with little or no loss of effectiveness. Actually, let's test you on that, we meant to do that at some point." He put a spell on himself, then said, "Hit me with 'Blue.'" Harry did so, and a gold 100 popped up next to Kingsley, who whistled and shook his head. "A sixteen-year-old with a 100... never thought I'd see that. So, yes, that's a big help, you don't have to say anything. We have an area with various random objects, we can have you practice moving them around, in different combinations."

They spent the morning doing a few more Apparation exercises and having Harry move multiple objects around. It was difficult at first, but after an hour's effort, he was finally able to set three objects along three separate preset paths. Then they practiced sending harmless spells at Harry to test his ability to block them with objects. He tended to miss them at first, but again, became better quickly with more practice. "There may not be too many times, though, when you'll need to move three things," said Kingsley. "I know you're thinking of keeping safe whoever you're with. Again, almost the hardest part may be finding things to use."

"Do wizards who are fighting ever use this skill to basically throw things at their opponent?" asked Harry.

"Not really," answered Tonks. "When you're fighting in that way, you have to be dueling. Throwing things is a very inefficient and tactically poor way to go about trying to defeat someone. Also, it's less effort for them to swat it away than it is for you to throw it."

"How do they swat it away?"

"With the Repulsion Charm," Tonks said. "It's a kind of a field, really, which extends about a foot from your body. Any object entering it will immediately go back the way it came, with the same force and direction it had coming in. That's why you have to be careful; if you throw objects, you have to be sure they don't originate from someplace on a line between you and them, because if they do that, the objects would just hit you. We'll teach you that one now, it won't take long." He practiced for a bit, and sure enough, he was soon causing objects to zoom away from him as fast as they came.

They stopped a little after noon to have some lunch, which was brought by house-elves. The conversation turned to Ministry politics and how it affected the Aurors.

"We all knew that Voldemort had come back, of course," Cassandra was saying to Harry. "None of us believed for a second what the Prophet was saying about him, we knew him better than that. One thing about being the Hogwarts headmaster for such a long time is that every single Auror had him for a headmaster, and we knew that in the unlikely event that he was starting to lose his marbles, he'd step down before it became apparent. But the problem was that we couldn't step forward as one and say that Fudge was full of it and Dumbledore was right. Not so much because we'd all be fired, because they really couldn't, but because we'd be setting ourselves up as the real authority. We have to be subordinate to the proper leadership, however stupid it may be."

"But if you had come out and said you believed that Voldemort was back," asked Harry, "wouldn't people have believed you and put pressure on the Ministry?"

Cassandra chuckled. "You're very good at magic, Harry, but I'm afraid you don't know much about this sort of thing. You think too well of most people. I'm afraid that Fudge was well suited to his position in one way: whether by chance or by design, he told people what they wanted to hear. And history has shown, both for wizards and for Muggles, that politicians who tell people what they want to hear do well.

"Some people would have believed us. But many more wouldn't have, because it wasn't what they wanted to hear. It would have created a hugely divisive rift in wizarding society, and made us enemies of the Ministry leadership. Now you may say that's a price worth paying to get people to recognize that Voldemort was back, and there's a point to that. But-and Dumbledore will agree with this if you ask him-again, we have to take our orders from the leadership. If we try to take over, even if for the best of reasons, then suddenly we'd be politicians ourselves, having our own internal fights and problems. I'm not saying there was no case for outright rebellion;

Voldemort being back was a huge problem. But many of us helped Dumbledore, which was as much as we could do, and as much as he wanted us to do."

Harry finished a bite of his food. "I guess I understand what you're saying. But I'm surprised that more people didn't believe Dumbledore. I mean, a lot of people knew him from Hogwarts, they had to have known what kind of person he is."

She shook her head sadly. "They did, but most were like Fudge-they just didn't want to believe it, and so found reasons not to. A society is only as good as its citizens, and in this case, our society kept its head stuck in the sand for too long. Dumbledore understood what was going on, of course, but didn't really have much choice but to do what he did. All he could do was do his best and hope that people would eventually see the truth, and work against Voldemort in the meantime, which he did very well."

"And now that people are starting to take their heads out of the sand," continued Kingsley, "here you come along, slapping their faces, telling them that they should say his name, that they should be brave. They know it's true, but... this may be hard for you to understand, brave as you are, but many people don't want to be bothered. They'd rather go about their business and keep their heads down. They'll be stirred to fight if their interests are directly threatened, or if friends or family are harmed, but only then, and often by then it's too late."

"I have a hard time believing that," said Harry. "I mean, look at Hogwarts. I've gotten nothing but support there since I started this thing. And this is even after the Prophet spent all year saying what a nutter I was."

"Well, a few things, Harry," Cassandra replied. "First of all, people there know you, and they can tell there's nothing wrong with you. Secondly, most kids don't read the Prophet, especially not deeply enough to find the little slurs about you. Thirdly, there wasn't enough time before Voldemort attacked you to find out exactly what support you would have gotten. What if he hadn't done it? I'm not saying people would have been hostile, but since it happened, I think it's not so much your campaign people have responded to as much as your bravery. Then they express their support by embracing your campaign. So the Hogwarts community has ample reason to support you. Some Gryffindors could hear you scream, and they told the other students, which is a kind of first-hand account. Dumbledore showed everyone part of your last dream. They could identify with it. Most people haven't seen it. They've heard about it, which is impressive enough. My point is, you're bound to get more support at Hogwarts." She paused, then said, "I can only imagine what it would be like if everyone had seen all the dreams, like we have. Winston wasn't too far off with his 'Minister of Magic by acclamation' comment."

Given that no one was objecting to what Cassandra was saying, he assumed that the rest of them felt much as she did. He didn't want to believe that wizarding society could be so shortsighted. "I can't argue with you... it's just frustrating to think that we have such a great person as Professor Dumbledore, and people don't even listen to him."

Kingsley nodded. "I can see why you'd feel that way, Harry. You aren't old enough to have become cynical yet," he said wryly. "Even our baby has gotten a bit cynical."

"Pretty darn cynical, after what happened last year," said Tonks. "That was quite an education. If there were any justice at all, Fudge would have been removed from office."

"Unfortunately, by the time most politicians' mistakes are made apparent, the damage from them has long since been done," said Cassandra. To Harry's surprised look at Kingsley's comment, she added, "We use the term 'baby' to refer to whoever the youngest Auror happens to be at the time, which of course is Tonks right now."

"But we're hoping you'll be our baby soon, Harry," said Tonks, grinning.

"Thanks," said Harry, finishing up the last bite of his lunch. "So, what are we doing in the afternoon?"

"Dueling," said Kingsley. "Dumbledore told us that your class has done the basic bit, but only with 'Blue,' of course. We want to teach you how to do it for real. He also said that you did very well in the class tournament, but you weren't the champion."

Harry nodded. "In fact, I'm looking forward to doing more with dueling, but I was wondering if we could also have for this the person who beat me. He's a friend, and I'd really like someone to be able to practice it with at Hogwarts. If he could learn with me, he could keep pace."

Cassandra shook her head. "I'm sorry, Harry, I can see why you'd want that, but it's irregular enough having you here. We can't start bringing people in here; you're kind of a special case."

Unhappy, Harry said, "I understand." He realized that he would have to be happy enough that he got to do this.

"Who beat you?" asked Tonks. "Ron?"

"No, Neville." Harry noted several surprised looks, but no one was more surprised than Cassandra, who looked incredulous. "Are you serious?"

"Of course," he said, surprised that she would say that. "Neville's skills have improved dramatically in the past year, I saw it happen in the D.A. But yes, in the class tournament he barely squeaked by me, but he wiped the floor with everyone else. He beat Malfoy in the sixth-year final, the whole class was cheering him. It was

great." He went on to explain why Neville's win was especially satisfying after what Malfoy had said earlier that day about his parents. The Aurors all looked disgusted, but not surprised, that Malfoy would have said such a thing.

Cassandra looked at Harry and said, "Yes, Harry. Neville can join us for the afternoon." This got a few surprised looks from the other Aurors. "Anyone want to argue with me?" she asked the room.

No one said anything for a moment, then Kingsley said, "No, I think we all know better than that. But we wouldn't argue anyway, Cassandra, you know that."

"Good," she said. "It'll be a pleasure to help train Neville, Harry. I didn't mean to be insulting of him by being so surprised. It's just that his grandmother has always said that he wasn't that talented."

Harry remembered what she had said at St. Mungo's. "I've heard her say it too, and I wished she wouldn't. Things like that probably contributed to his being so shy for such a long time. But it looks now like he had talent all along, but just had a hard time bringing it out. I'm sure it hasn't helped that we've had more than our share of poor Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers at Hogwarts. I have to admit that when we played, I expected to beat him. I was really happy for him, though."

Cassandra stood up. "Jack, would you do me a favor and go get Neville authorized for our fireplace?" Temble nodded and left the room. "Harry, why don't you come with me to get him. You can get your first experience... have you ever been to Neville's house?" Harry shook his head. "So, it'll be your first time Apparating someplace where you've never been. Good practice for you."

"So, how do I do it? Do I look at a map?"

"Yes, that's the most common way if you've never been to the place before. I'll go get some maps, and I'll show you where it is, find the nearest Apparation point." She got up and left the room.

"What did she mean by 'Apparation point?'" Harry asked the others.

"When wizards live not far from Muggles, as many wizards do," explained Kingsley, "it's obviously not a good idea to Apparate anyplace on the street. One could be seen, and we prefer to avoid doing Memory Charms if we can. So, many places have pre-selected points onto which it's recommended for wizards to Apparate if they're going to that area. That's what Cassandra will be looking for."

"Not to mention they'd hear the sound," Harry agreed. "Speaking of that, I forgot to ask earlier... when anyone's ever Apparated or Disapparated around me, I've heard a popping sound. But I didn't hear it when I did it. Why is that?"

"No one really knows," answered Tonks. "We assume it's for a similar reason that your voice sounds different to you in a recording than it does in your head."

"Okay," said Cassandra, walking back into the dining area. She moved aside some dishes and laid out maps in front of Harry. "Here's a map of England, we're here, and here's the village Neville lives in. Now," she put a different map on top of the others, "Here's a closer map of Neville's area. There's a field a few doors down from his house, and this area has some trees. We'll Apparate here and then walk, it'll only take a few minutes. I assume you're ready to go anytime?"

Harry stood up. "Ready when you are."

"Okay, I'll go first. When you're thinking about where to go, visualizing it, you should also visualize me in that place. It may help you get closer to where I'll be. If you get there and you don't see me anywhere, just come back here and we'll try again. But I have a feeling you'll find me. Are you ready?"

He looked at the maps again, visualizing. "Okay. Go ahead."

With a pop, she was gone. Harry visualized the area, with particular attention to ending up as close to her as possible. He willed himself there.

He was suddenly standing near some trees, and near her-rather nearer than he had intended. His face was about four inches from hers. Just as this was registering, she gave a start. "Harry!" she gasped, putting her hands on his shoulders and taking a step back. "Oh, you startled me! Can't fault your aim, though," she said, recovering. "That was pretty impressive, really. I just didn't expect it."

"Sorry," he said as they started walking. "You can tell I'm still new at this. I focused on standing as close to you as I could, I forgot to think that I might get closer than I should. I didn't think I'd get nearly that close." He chuckled; she looked at him inquiringly. "I was just thinking, if it was Tonks, she would have said I did it deliberately."

Cassandra laughed. "Yes, she would've. So, what she's doing doesn't bother you?"

"Well, at first I was a little nervous. I'm not used to people acting like that with me. But I like Tonks, and I'm flattered that she does it. So I'm trying to, like Kingsley said, get into the spirit of it. Probably if she stopped now, I'd be disappointed."

She laughed again. "Yes, I can see how you could get used to that. I have a feeling she won't be the only one, Harry. She's just doing it a bit more obviously, for humorous effect. But I have a feeling that if you were the same age, it wouldn't be quite so obvious or quite so humorous."

"Hermione said the same thing," he said. "I've never really had a girlfriend, so I don't know how I'd react. But she's a nice person, and she's attractive. I'm surprised she's not taken already, come to think of it."

Cassandra's expression became more serious. "You'll find, Harry, that a higher proportion of Aurors are single than is usual. Our lifestyle makes dating kind of difficult. Also, it's hard to be married to an Auror. I'm married, but I'm unusual. My husband isn't the worrying type, but now that Voldemort is back, even he's a little worried. We have to be ready to pop off at a second's notice, into highly dangerous situations. It would be unnatural for someone's partner not to worry."

"Do you have kids?" Harry asked, curious.

"No," she said, in a way that made him wonder if she had wanted to. "Not as a choice, it just never happened. It wasn't something we desperately wanted, so that was all right. But even fewer Aurors have children, especially women. Female Aurors who have babies usually take a year off to take care of the baby, and it makes being an Auror in general a lot harder. When Frank and Alice had Neville, that was unusual. They went to school together, and fell in love while training to be Aurors. We were wondering how they were going to handle raising a son, with the demands on their time. We assume that his grandmother would have had a significant role anyway. Ah, here we are," she said, walking up to a small but nice-looking house. She rang the doorbell.

After a few seconds, Neville's grandmother opened the door. She was clearly surprised by who she saw. "Cassandra, Professor Potter, please come in," she said politely. "Neville had said that you would be with the Aurors, Professor. What brings you here?"

Neville walked into the room. "Harry! Cassandra!" he said. Cassandra walked over to Neville and hugged him. "Hello, Neville," she said. Harry got the impression that this was a standard greeting, and he wondered if she thought of Neville in a motherly way. She let go of Neville, who looked at Harry with curiosity. "What are the two of you doing here? I thought they were going to be working with you on that spell."

"Well, Neville, it turns out that they wanted to train me in Auror stuff instead." Neville's eyebrows shot up. "Yeah, I know, I'm pretty happy about it," Harry agreed. "Anyway, this afternoon they wanted to teach me dueling, real dueling. I asked them if you could join us, so you could learn along with me, and I'd have a sparring partner I could practice with in Gryffindor Tower. I hope you can come with us for the afternoon."

Neville's eyes went wide. "Are you serious? I'd love to! I'm just... really surprised. I... I would have thought you'd have asked for Ron to join you," he said, embarrassed.

"We would have said no to Ron, Neville," said Cassandra. "That's who I thought he was going to ask for, too. But he didn't; he asked for you. Obviously, I wasn't going to say no."

"Well, I did have plans for Neville and myself for this afternoon," said Mrs. Longbottom, "but I suspect that Neville would never forgive me if I did not change them. We can do them some other day. You both are doing him a great honor."

"It's nothing he doesn't deserve, Mrs. Longbottom," Harry protested. "Didn't he tell you that he beat me, and was the sixth-year dueling champion?"

This was the first time Harry had ever seen Neville's grandmother look surprised. "Neville? Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"I was going to, Gran," said Neville. "But you know how I am about sending owls, and I just hadn't gotten a chance to say it in person yet. Vacation just started, after all."

"I expect a full account of it when you return," she said, her pride in his accomplishment understated but clear. "Both that tournament, I mean, and today's activities."

Neville nodded and smiled, clearly very excited. "I promise, Gran. Thank you, both of you," he said to Harry and Cassandra.

"Like I said, Neville, you deserve it," said Harry emphatically. "You're good, and I'll be able to get better practicing against you." Neville looked even more pleased.

"Would you like to use the fireplace?" asked Mrs. Longbottom.

"Yes, thank you," said Cassandra.

"Wait a minute, Harry. How did you get here?" asked Neville.

"That was what we did this morning, Neville." He explained, and enjoyed watching Neville's expression. "So, yeah, I was pretty excited about that."

"I sure would be, too," Neville agreed. "But it's a good idea, after Hogsmeade especially. You could be targeted again, and being able to get away could save your life." Then he looked dismayed. "Of course, you'd never leave if anyone else around was in danger. So maybe it's not that useful."

"Professor Potter," said Mrs. Longbottom sternly. "Neville nearly died helping to save you. Do not misunderstand; I am as proud of his action as I can be. I know his parents are proud. But I will be most displeased if what Neville almost died to protect is wasted carelessly. You must take great care to stay alive. Do you understand me?"

Harry felt as though he were talking to an even stricter version of Professor McGonagall. "Yes, ma'am," he said solemnly. He could see Neville grinning, out of his grandmother's field of vision.

"Very well. Have a pleasant day, all of you." She gestured them to the fireplace.

They went through, one by one, Harry last. He stepped out of the fireplace at the Auror Training Center to see Neville looking around, slightly awed by his surroundings. Not what was in the place, Harry realized, but just the place itself.

Cassandra called out, "We're back!" The other six Aurors walked into the room; in turn, they introduced themselves to Neville and greeted him warmly. Neville, still a bit awed, shook their hands but said little. After a few minutes of small talk, Kingsley said, "Okay, well, let's get down to it. Neville, Harry, follow me, please."

They followed him into a large, mostly empty room that was obviously for training. "First, let me watch you two have a few bouts with each other using Blue, so I can take a look at your technique, see if anything needs to be fixed." Neville and Harry squared off and fought twice, each taking one bout, each one again lasting more than a minute. "Very good," said Kingsley. "You two are quite evenly matched. Neville, would you hit me with Blue, silently, please?" Neville did, and a gold 86 popped up next to Kingsley. Harry and Neville both raised their eyebrows. "It was 79 a few months ago," said Neville.

"Quite an improvement in such a short time. But then, you have Dumbledore teaching you, so I shouldn't be surprised," said Kingsley. "Even so, you're operating at a disadvantage relative to Harry. Very impressive." Neville smiled proudly. "Okay, we're going to start with some of the more basic techniques and spell combinations, and work our way up to the more advanced ones. I don't mean to say that you two will be able to take on Death Eaters by the time we're finished today, but I want to give you as much new information as I can. Then, you can practice at Hogwarts, and get better at what you'll learn today."

Kingsley spent the next few hours gradually moving them through the basics and the intermediate techniques and skills. Harry felt it was a bit like chess; now they were being taught how the pieces moved, the proper role of each piece, and general strategy. By the end of the day, they would know as much as reasonably possible, and it just remained to practice. It felt like an unusually difficult but interesting class, requiring great concentration. Occasionally they dueled so Kingsley could check on how they were applying what they were learning. Sometimes Kingsley would have a bout with either of them, defeat them by using a particular technique, then teach it to them and teach them how to defend against it. Then they practiced it.

At 5:00, Kingsley suggested they call it a day, but both Harry and Neville pleaded for more time. Kingsley agreed to go for one more hour. At the end of the

hour, tired and hungry but still exhilarated, Harry and Neville reluctantly stopped. They talked with Kingsley for a little while about strategic aspects of dueling, then went with him to the dining area when dinner was served. They sat down at the table with the rest of the Aurors who had been there earlier.

"So, how'd they do?" asked Cassandra, who Harry knew was much more interested in Neville's progress than his.

"Very well," replied Kingsley. "Coming along nicely, especially for having as little experience as they do. Still too early to tell, but I see no reason why either couldn't become expert, with enough practice." Harry and Neville exchanged a grin.

"That's great, really great," she said. "Neville, your grandmother had never said anything about your having this kind of skill. Did this happen recently?"

Neville glanced at Harry, then nodded. "It was because of being in the D.A., Harry's study group."

"But Neville, whatever talent you have is nothing I created, or had anything to do with. All the D.A. did was give you a chance to practice," protested Harry.

Neville shook his head. "It was much more than that, Harry. I think what was stopping me before was psychological. I was always terrified of teachers, feeling that I wouldn't measure up, or get thrown out for not being magical enough. My gran worried that I wouldn't get into Hogwarts in the first place. Anyway, people like Snape didn't help me any."

"Snape was always awful to Neville," Harry explained to the group. "Neville was his favorite target besides me."

Neville shuddered. "That class was a nightmare, I'm so happy to be rid of it. But anyway, I was always really afraid of teachers, except Professor Sprout. I liked her, and I liked Herbology. But the others... it was just hard to get past. But the D.A... Harry had more to do with my skill coming out than he realizes, or will admit," said Neville, glancing at Harry as he said the last part. "Harry was being a teacher in that group, and a good one. He didn't criticize, didn't act like something wasn't good enough. I started to realize I could... I don't know, get into it, I guess, without worrying. And once that happened, it just felt as if I wanted to make up for lost time. I looked forward to that time every week."

"Thank you for that, Neville," said Harry. "I'm really glad. I looked forward to it too. There was far too little to look forward to last year. But, yes," Harry said to the group, "at some point, Neville just... blossomed is the only word I can think of. He tried really, really hard, and became one of the strongest members of the group. It was pretty amazing to watch. And satisfying, too." As was the case earlier in the year, Harry didn't want to suggest what he suspected, that the escape of Bellatrix Lestrange and other Death Eaters from Azkaban had motivated Neville greatly.

Neville said nothing about it, so Harry didn't either. Harry wondered if Neville just didn't want to acknowledge it, or was so appreciative of Harry's efforts that he wanted to give Harry more credit than he should.

"I'll bet," said Tonks. "So, Neville, have you ever considered becoming an Auror?"

"No," Neville said. "I never for a minute thought I would be good enough."

"From what I saw today, it's far from impossible," said Kingsley. "If you think it's something you'd like to do, you should think about it, find out more about it."

"But he couldn't, could he?" asked Harry. "I was told that you had to have a N.E.W.T. in Potions, and he's stopped taking Potions."

"That can be gotten around," said Tonks. "Potions is the least important of what's supposed to be necessary."

Harry looked very dismayed. "I thought I had to have Potions to even have a chance of becoming an Auror, it was what Professor McGonagall told me on Career Day last year. I'd hate to think I'm taking N.E.W.T. Potions for nothing."

"Well, technically, she's right," explained Cassandra. "On paper. Tonks just means that some people have become Aurors without it, if they were exceptional in other ways and did outside study in Potions to get up to speed."

"Especially these days," remarked a clearly annoyed Kingsley. "There have been fewer new Aurors than usual over the past ten years, and we're pretty sure that Snape is part of the reason. Not him personally, though maybe partly, but the fact that no one can take the N.E.W.T. course unless they got an Outstanding O.W.L. Some people who might have become Aurors otherwise probably looked at the requirements, decided they couldn't fill them because they couldn't get into the Potions course, and didn't investigate being an Auror further. A few years back I asked Dumbledore to persuade Snape to change the requirements, but Snape wouldn't. Recently, we've been seriously considering pushing the Ministry to change the paper requirements to a Potions O.W.L. instead of a N.E.W.T., and doing extra Potions training ourselves. If this continues, it could really become a problem."

Harry nodded, surprised. "I think Neville could do fine with Potions provided that Severus Snape was nowhere in the area." Neville grunted in agreement.

"I can understand that," said Tonks sympathetically. "I had him for Potions when I was there. It would be hard to imagine someone more unpleasant. What's wrong with him, anyway? Cassandra, you were at Hogwarts around the same time as him, weren't you? Did you know him?"

"I was two years older than him," answered Cassandra. "He was well known for being interested in the Dark Arts, and for being an adversary of some same-year Gryffindor students, mainly Harry's father and Sirius Black. I haven't dealt with him

recently, so I can't say if he's like how he was then. But he wasn't exactly a fun person then, either. Just seemed like someone mired in darkness. From what you say, it sounds like he still is. Yet Dumbledore trusts him. I'd love to know why."

"I've asked him," said Harry. "He won't tell me, says it's a private matter between him and Snape. What I'd like to know is why he puts up with Snape being so horrible to the students. I mean, me I can understand; I'm the son of his worst enemy, world-famous in a way I didn't do anything to deserve. But why Neville? Because he wasn't good at Potions, or was afraid of teachers? It's hard to understand."

Kingsley nodded. "There's a lot of things in this world that we don't understand all that well, and that we never will. This is definitely one of them. Something happened between Snape and Dumbledore that we'll never know."

There was silence for a minute. Then Harry said, "Can I ask you something... you said earlier that even if five or ten of you surrounded Voldemort and threw spells and anti-Disapparation fields at him, he could still get away, because he's so powerful. So how is he ever going to be defeated, if he's that powerful?"

He looked at their faces; nobody seemed very happy with the question. "The answer is that we don't know," said Kingsley. "We try to come up with things, but we almost have to hope to get lucky. That's part of why Voldemort's such a big threat: he's so hard to kill. Frankly, Harry, our biggest hope is you."

The other Aurors did not seem surprised to hear him say that, so Harry assumed it was a widely held opinion among the Aurors. Neville looked a bit surprised, perhaps wondering whether they knew the same part of the prophecy that he did. Tonks said, "You don't seem surprised to hear that, Harry. Have other people told you this, or has it occurred to you on your own?"

Harry tried to filter everything he said through the idea of not wanting to mention or refer to the prophecy. "There are too many connections I have to Voldemort not to think of it that way," he said. "The scar, the telepathic connection, my being a Parselmouth, and then recently, the spell I came up with. Not that I have any idea how I could beat him, mind you. Just that I seem extremely connected. Still, as long as we have Dumbledore, I have to think Voldemort can be beaten. I just wondered what you guys thought about it."

"We sit around, Harry, and wonder what we can do," said Cassandra. "Right now, the best we can do is try to do what Neville did, to keep you alive. That's why you're here."

"Excuse me," said Neville, with trepidation. "Why am I here, then?"

Cassandra met Neville's eyes. "Partly because Harry asked for you... and partly because... Aurors are very close to each other, Neville. It's kind of like a big family."

Even if some of us don't like each other that much, we're still like family. And that makes you sort of an extended family member. I feel an obligation to you, to do what I can to help you. You lost your parents to their jobs. The least we can do is look out for you a bit." Now she smiled. "And it doesn't hurt that you're a very nice person." As Neville looked down, embarrassed, Cassandra got up and left the table, and the rest continued talking. About fifteen minutes later, she came back in and sat down. "Harry, I should have asked you first, but I have a feeling you won't mind. Neville, I've just been to see your grandmother, and she's given her permission to have you stay with us until Monday, meaning, as long as Harry will. If you want to, that is."

Harry grinned and turned to Neville, whose expression suggested that Christmas had come early. "Thank you, Cassandra," said Neville. "I really appreciate it."

The conversation turned to Neville's parents, and those Aurors who knew them shared their recollections with Neville. As they talked, Harry felt a warm glow of contentment; this was a wonderful thing to have happened to Neville, and it wouldn't have happened if he hadn't requested it. He knew he would enjoy the next two days.

Chapter 17

Christmas at the Burrow

On Monday night at a little after six o'clock, Harry stepped out of the fireplace at the Burrow to see Arthur Weasley sitting in the living room, reading. "Harry, dear," said Molly, walking in from the kitchen, wearing an apron. She hugged and kissed him, and Arthur got up and shook his hand. "Good to see you, Harry. Did you have a good time with the Aurors?"

"Very good, thanks," Harry replied. "They showed me all kinds of stuff, it was great. But I'm happy to be here, now."

"Well, we're thrilled to have you," said Molly enthusiastically. "This is the first Christmas we've had you here, we've been looking forward to it. We've had too few young people in the house these days."

"That reminds me, Mrs. Weasley—"

"Molly, dear, Molly."

Harry nodded. "Molly... I was wondering if you were still upset with Fred and George. I kind of feel bad about it, since I'm the one who gave them the gold for the shop. I mean, I don't regret it, I'd do it again, but since they were able to open the shop because of me, and you were upset at them because of that, I felt bad because—"

To Harry's surprise, she looked at him fondly and touched his lips with her hand so he would stop talking. "It's sweet of you to worry about that, but it's all right. I may not approve of their career choice, but I've resigned myself to it, and at least I know they're happy. Arthur tells me I just got spoiled by the older children all being high achievers, and I suppose he's right. Really, don't worry."

Harry wondered whether she was just saying this to make him feel better, but she seemed genuine enough. Maybe the passage of time had helped her get over it. "I'm glad," he said. "I just didn't want to cause any problems."

"Even if you had, nobody could fault your motives," said Arthur. "What you did was extremely generous. You saved them at least a few years of scrounging and making huge efforts to get the money necessary for a shop, and enabled them to start in a good position. Look at how well they're doing now. They've worked hard, but it wouldn't have been possible without you."

Harry nodded, but said, "Yes, but I have lots of money from my parents. It's not such a big sacrifice to give away a thousand Galleons when you've got much more than that in a Gringotts vault. People act like it was a big deal, but it really wasn't."

"It really was, Harry," said Molly. "Most people wouldn't give away a thousand Galleons like that even if they had a hundred thousand more. And if they did, they'd want something in return, to be owed a favor. Maybe it wasn't a financial sacrifice for you, but it was extremely thoughtful, and that's what's important."

It wasn't that thoughtful because I was desperate to get rid of the money, Harry almost said, but he didn't think it was right to continue arguing the point. "I'm just glad they've done so well with it," he said. "Will they be coming by very much during vacation?"

"Sometimes, but not as much as we'd like," said Arthur. "Diagon Alley is open during much of vacation, and they want to keep the shop open almost every day. They're only closing for Christmas Day and New Year's Day, and then only because all the other shops are as well. So they'll be here for some of those two days, at least."

Ron and Ginny walked into the room. "Hey, Harry, thought we heard you," said Ron. "So, how was it with the Aurors? I'm sure Mum and Dad want to hear about it too."

"Hold on, Ron, you know we promised Hermione we'd get her first," chided Ginny. Then, to Harry, she said, "We popped over to Hermione's yesterday for a bit, and we decided that she'd come over for dinner tonight so we could all hear the Auror story, and you wouldn't have to tell it twice. Hang on, I'll go get her." She tossed some Floo powder into the fireplace and was off. Less than a minute later, she was back with Hermione. Molly announced that dinner was ready, and they sat down.

"Well, I'll give you the big news first," said Harry. "Two things: one, they didn't want to talk about the spell after all; instead, they gave me three days of Auror training." Ron gaped in obvious envy. "Second, they fixed it with the Ministry so that I'm officially considered to be of age, right now, and they taught me how to Apparate. I can now do it any time I want."

Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were all stunned, and temporarily speechless. Arthur and Molly didn't seem especially surprised. "Yes, it's about time they did that," said Arthur. "The Ministry should have thought of it themselves. I would have suggested it to them, but it's so well known how close you are to us, it would have been unseemly for me to suggest it, like I wanted special favors for you. Better that the Aurors did it."

"You three look like Harry's just been made Minister of Magic," Molly teased Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. "It's just common sense. He's in significant danger all the time; Disapparating could save his life. Seventeen is an arbitrary age, and it would be stupid to deny him the ability to keep himself safe just because he isn't of age."

"Still... that's so cool, Harry... so, you could have Apparated over here if you'd wanted to? Did you?" asked Ron eagerly.

"No, I took the fireplace," Harry said. "They gave me a quick course in Apparation customs and manners, and they said it's always better to take the fireplace if you can, because it's not as jarring when people appear there."

Arthur nodded. "Pretty much the same things they tell you at the Apparation Test Center when you get your license. Oh, I don't want to forget to ask. Did they gamble on anything while you were there? Kingsley sometimes tries to get me to join these pools they get going. I tell him that I'll join their pools when I get an Auror's salary."

"Yes, they did. I hadn't known they gambled so much. They had a pool on how quickly I would learn to Apparate."

Molly and Arthur laughed. "Leave it to them..." said Arthur. "So who won, how much money, and with what guess?"

"Tonks, a hundred Galleons, and she said I'd do it on the first try."

Now, the adults were the ones who were extremely impressed. "First try? It took me over two hours," said Arthur. Harry explained why he and Kingsley thought he did it so quickly. "That makes sense," Arthur agreed, "but it's still very impressive. Of course, it's nothing next to what else you've done, but still... Good for Tonks, she must have been very happy."

"Speaking of which, how did it go with her, Harry?" asked a smiling Hermione.

"Pretty well. I tried to take your advice, and it was fun. The other Aurors knew what she was doing, and they thought it was pretty funny. Like, on the second day,

she asked me to take a walk with her, and she held my hand the whole time. It was kind of nice, actually. She spent most of the walk giving me advice on what to do when I do get a girlfriend. I just hope I can remember it all."

"So, after learning to Apparate, what did you do?" asked Ron, who seemed less interested in what happened with Tonks than the others.

"I learned how to move around multiple objects at once, so I can hopefully block Killing Curses if I have to. Then in the afternoon, it was dueling." He explained his request to the Aurors, and told about how Neville came to be involved.

"Oh, that was so good of you, Harry," Hermione gushed. "Neville must have been thrilled." Ron looked like he was trying to appear nonchalant but doing very badly, which Hermione noticed as well. "Come on, Ron, he can't always ask for you or I in those situations. It made perfect sense to ask for Neville. He and Harry are about the same skill level dueling, and Neville's parents were Aurors. He deserved it."

"I don't begrudge him that," said a somewhat chastened Ron. "I just wish it could have been all of us. That would have been so cool..."

"I would have liked to have had all of you, Ron, believe me," said Harry. "They wouldn't have taken anyone but Neville. They're kind of fussy about who visits their training area, but Cassandra has a soft spot for Neville, and she was really surprised when I told her that Neville was the sixth-year dueling champion. So, not only did he stay for the afternoon's lesson on dueling, but she asked him to stay for the remaining two days as well." He then launched into the full version of his Auror visit. He had to remember to take bites of his food before it got cold. After ten minutes, he finished.

"That sounds so great, Harry," said Ginny. "But even better than how cool it is, is how it'll help if you have to fight anybody. I'm really glad that you'll be safer."

"Yeah, me too. Now I feel like I at least have an even shot against a Death Eater, if they're not too strong a one. Oh, that reminds me, they also showed me how to put down an anti-Disapparation field. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to do one strong enough to stop any of them from Disapparating. Of course, they're Aurors, so I shouldn't have expected to be able to, so fast. They say I'll get better with more training. I was wondering if I could try it on you two," he said to Arthur and Molly. "I want to know if what I have so far will work on non-Aurors."

"Sure, Harry," said Arthur. He stood and Apparated over to the living room. Harry walked over, and put up the field. After a few seconds, Arthur said, "You did it. I tried to Disapparate but couldn't." He walked back to the table. Harry sat down, satisfied.

"Now, bear in mind, I'm not one of the strongest wizards in the world," added Arthur. "And with my job being what it is, I don't have much occasion to practice. But it's still very good that you can do that much, after a very short time."

"Thanks," said Harry. "I just want to get it to the point where I can stop most Death Eaters from getting away."

"I'm not sure how much good that's going to do, they'll just get away from custody anyway," grumbled Molly.

"Maybe not for long," replied Arthur. "I heard today that they may be taking stronger measures against the ones they have in custody."

"Yes, they were talking about that, at lunch on Sunday," said Harry. To the others, he explained, "The escape on Halloween of the ones they caught in the Department of Mysteries made the Aurors really angry, apparently. The way they talked about it sounded like they don't trust the Ministry to keep guard over these people. Apparently some Aurors want to keep custody of Death Eaters themselves, while some don't want their time taken up by doing that sort of thing. They had an argument at the dining table."

Arthur nodded. "The problem is, we're so used to putting people in Azkaban, we neglected to develop any kind of professional system of secure incarceration. We're going to have to work on that, but the Ministry is dragging its feet. Or was, at least, until the escape. Now, some people are talking about more extreme measures."

"What sort of extreme measures?" asked Hermione.

"For example, putting them under sedation, or some types of spell or potions that affect their ability to move, or act quickly," said Arthur. "Some people are even seriously suggesting that they be put under the Imperius Curse, so they would actually resist attempts by their comrades to break them out. Most people in the Ministry don't approve of that-there is quite a taboo around the Imperius Curse, given that it's one of the Unforgivable Curses-but the fact that it's even being discussed is an indication of how seriously the situation is being taken."

"The Aurors seem to have different opinions about it," added Harry. "A few support the use of the Imperius Curse, but most don't. A few think nothing should be done that affects the prisoners' rights, that we just have to develop a better system of keeping people locked up. The others say there's no time for that, that we can't afford to lose captured Death Eaters while they try to work out a better system. I got the impression that they've had a few arguments about it."

"I'm not surprised," said Arthur. "People who harmed or killed Aurors would be the ones escaping, so they would naturally have strong opinions about it."

"As I listened to them talk," said Harry, "I couldn't help but think, Hermione, of-"

"Of that day in Hogsmeade, the day before the attack," she finished. "Yes, me too, it's almost exactly like that." She explained to the others what they had talked about. "So, the question is, do we do what's expedient, that may save more lives and enhance our security, or do we impose measures we normally wouldn't, measures that could lead down a path to a police state? It's a very serious issue, and judging from our History of Magic lectures, one that almost every generation has to deal with."

"But the situation is so serious now, I think we have to risk leaning a bit in that direction," said Molly. "Our society's freedom is at stake. If Voldemort wins, we won't have the luxury of debating what measures to take against prisoners. I don't approve of the use of the Imperius Curse, but as long as Voldemort is around, something stronger needs to be done, even if it's not what we'd normally do."

"Molly and I have already had discussions about this," said Arthur. "I wouldn't go as far as she does, but I recognize the validity of her point. That's why it's such a hard issue; the practical aspects can't be dismissed so easily. To just say 'prisoners' rights must be respected' and leave it at that just seems very pie-in-the-sky right now. The slippery-slope argument doesn't seem that important, but I still think it is." Hermione explained the phrase to her fellow students.

"What do you think, Harry?" asked Ginny.

"I'm not sure; the Aurors never asked Neville or I what we thought. Maybe they thought it would be rude to involve us. But just based on what I'm hearing now, I think I'm very close to your mother's opinion. Not that I don't see your father's point, but it has to be a first priority that no more of them escape. Not only because they'll kill people who they otherwise wouldn't if they escape, but if they think they can escape so easily, they'll be really brazen about doing what they want, they won't care about getting caught because they'll always be sure they can escape. That attitude on their parts could lead to even more deaths."

"Exactly, Harry," said Molly emphatically. "Just exactly what I said to Arthur a few days ago. We can't risk that."

"What do you think, Hermione?" asked Arthur.

Hermione looked a little nervous. "For one thing, I think you're asking me because you think I'll think the same way as you," she said, smiling apologetically.

Arthur smiled back. "I keep hearing about how clever you are, Hermione. I see that it's well deserved. And?"

She took a deep breath. "And you're right, I feel very much like you do. Too much has happened in history once people started down this path for me to feel comfortable with it. And like Mr. Weasley," she said to the others, especially Molly and Harry, "I'm not saying that we should do nothing we wouldn't normally do. I know

how serious the situation is. But we have to be really, really careful what we do, or before you know it, we'll be rounding up all known werewolves just to be on the safe side."

Harry was very surprised. "What do werewolves have to do with it?"

"The point Hermione's making, and it's a good one," explained Arthur, "is that once you have an atmosphere where you start doing things you wouldn't usually do, it opens the door for people who want to take advantage of it to push their own fears and prejudices, and to gain power in doing so. Once you take away the rights or liberties of one group, it's that much easier to do it to another. I think she picked werewolves to bring the point home to you a bit better, since you're close to Remus. Remember, Harry, Dolores Umbridge was able to push through that anti-werewolf legislation a few years ago, the one that made Remus's already difficult life much worse. And that was in an atmosphere of no particular danger or alert. What if people started saying that werewolves were more likely to be Dark wizards, and were starting to bite people to gain more recruits? What if it was believed? People will believe a lot in an atmosphere of fear, and politicians will be quick to exploit that. What Hermione suggests may be unlikely to happen, but it's not at all inconceivable." Arthur went on to give a brief lecture on the subject on the fate of Japanese-Americans during World War II. "Far more than ninety-nine percent of those people were loyal American citizens, but they lost four years of their lives and freedom because of their race. The Americans ignored their own laws to do what they did, and most people agreed with it, or didn't debate it strongly. I could give you many, many other historical examples."

Even though she disagreed with him, Molly looked at her husband fondly. "You don't want to get Arthur started on this, he'll talk for hours. He got Outstanding N.E.W.T.s in History of Magic and Muggle Studies. He reads Muggle history books, so I know he knows what he's talking about. I know he has a good point. I just think if we're conscious of the danger, we can avoid it."

"The problem is, Molly, that while you and I may be conscious of the danger, most people won't be. I mean, Harry is rallying people to say Voldemort's name. That's an easy idea to understand, and the reason for it is obvious. But what if he was rallying people to be careful of what measures we take that could deprive people of their liberties? It's a very conceptual, nuanced argument, and if people don't have a good grasp of history, they won't get it. The demagogues shouting about safety would drown Harry out, and people would dismiss him as some nut who doesn't care that people are dying, his personal bravery and accomplishments notwithstanding. If people aren't aware of the danger, the leadership has to be. If Dumbledore were Minister of Magic, I'd be more confident. But Fudge is just the type who'd take

whatever harsh measures that seemed to be justified, with no sense of perspective. He'll follow where people lead him."

There was silence for a few seconds as people digested this. Then Molly said, "Well, at least it's good that we're having this discussion, that's what people should be doing. Harry, dear, you may want to think about this some more, get a clearer feeling about what your opinion is. You're a prominent public figure, and you may be asked about it if the subject becomes a bigger issue. People will listen to what you say. They may not agree, of course, but they'll listen."

Harry's head was swimming; he still didn't have a definite opinion on the subject, and it seemed like something that he shouldn't be deciding, that it should be for people smarter than him. The problem was, Arthur and Hermione were saying that the smart people wouldn't be the ones making the decisions, and he could see that was true, based on what had happened last year. He was also very affected, as Hermione had obviously intended, by what she had said about Remus. He hated to think of Remus locked up for no reason, as hard a life as he had already had. Could stronger measures against prisoners really lead to that? He didn't want to think so, but the people at the table who knew history best seemed to think it was possible. But the idea of more Death Eaters escaping was also terrible. "I just don't know," he finally said. "It seems like we're stuck between equally bad choices. I still think that it's extremely important that we keep the Death Eaters locked up, but I don't want to ignore Hermione and Arthur's concerns, either. One thing I want to do is talk to Remus about this. I'd be very interested to know what he thinks."

"Well, you'll be able to find out, Harry," said Molly. "He'll be joining us for dinner sometime later this week. I'd like to know what he thinks, too." She stood up and started clearing the dishes.

Arthur got up as well. "I'm going upstairs for a bit, so you four can have the living room. See you later," he said as he left the room. Harry and the others headed for the living room.

They had all just entered it when Hermione wheeled on Ron, looking angry, to Harry's great surprise. "All right, Ron, exactly what is your problem?"

Ron reacted as though he'd been slapped for no reason. "What? What are you talking about?"

"You were pouting all through dinner," Hermione said. "You barely heard a word we said about the prisoner situation."

Ron was still mystified, or acting like it. "I didn't have anything to say! Is there something wrong with that?"

"Hermione's right, Ron," added Ginny. "You were really unhappy, it was totally obvious. I was surprised Mum or Dad didn't say anything."

"You're upset," Hermione continued, "because Harry asked Neville to visit the Aurors with him instead of you. What have you got against Neville? Do you think you're more deserving of it than him?"

"Of course not!" Ron almost shouted. He looked at Hermione as if she were a bit loopy, and Harry could understand why. Then Ron angrily said, "I don't have to listen to this," and headed for the door.

Hermione, standing closer, blocked it with her body. "You're not going anywhere until you tell me what your problem is."

Ron couldn't believe it. "This is my house! I can leave the room if I want to!" Hermione just stared at him, angry, unmoving. They stared at each other for a few seconds.

"Hermione," said Harry tentatively, "if he doesn't want to talk about it-"

"Stay out of this, Harry," she said vehemently. Harry immediately decided not to say another word.

Finally Ron walked to the sofa and flopped down onto it. Ginny sat down next to him. "Ron, I admit I don't know what Hermione's so upset about, but it was pretty obvious that you were upset at dinner. If you could tell us-"

"It has absolutely nothing to do with Neville, that's for sure," said Ron, looking angrily at Hermione. Ginny looked at him expectantly. Ron moaned, obviously feeling trapped. "Look," he said to Ginny, almost pleading. "You know I'd rather have teeth pulled than talk about this kind of thing. I just... got upset, that's all. I'll deal with it, it'll be fine. Just leave me alone."

Harry wished for Ron's sake they would, but Hermione obviously wasn't going to let it go. "Ron, you were angry at either Neville or Harry, and neither of them deserves it. I want to know which one, and why."

"Hermione, I said I'd get over it! Since when do we have to have some big conversation about it? This kind of thing has always worked itself out without that," argued Ron.

"Yeah, look how well it worked itself out in fourth year, when Harry got stuck in the Triwizard competition," said Hermione in a low but angry voice. "You two didn't talk for, what, a month? You know how hard that was for me, being in the middle of that? Trying to persuade you two idiots to just have one conversation, where you could have worked it out in just a few minutes, like eventually happened? But no, neither of you would talk to the other. I'm not going to have that happen again, Ron, so yes, we're going to talk about it. What is your problem? Are you mad that Harry asked Neville and not you?"

Ron had his head in his hands, clearly frustrated but also embarrassed, seeming to know that she would get out of him what she wanted to. "It's not like that, exactly," he said, finally dropping his defenses. "I mean, I felt a bit like that, but I know it was wrong. All the arguments are right, Neville's a better dueler than I am, and his parents... I know that. That feeling... I was jealous, I guess... would have gone away in just a minute. But it's something else." He paused, thinking. Harry almost ached with empathy for what Ron was going through, admitting something personal when it was the last thing he wanted to do.

Finally, Ron continued. "Harry's become a teacher. He goes off to the staff room, someplace we can't go. We do take the advanced lessons from Dumbledore with him, but only because he asked; Dumbledore would have just as soon given them to him alone. Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape talk to him about Order stuff, stuff that I'm sure he isn't allowed to talk to us about. Then this Auror thing. I just feel like..." He breathed heavily, then continued. "Like Harry's drifting away from us... from me. The whole wizarding society is grabbing for pieces of him, and there won't be enough to go around as it is. I remember the way it was with the three of us, and I feel like it won't ever be that way anymore." He paused, then glared at Hermione. "There. You happy now?"

Harry looked at Hermione, who was near tears. She ran over to the sofa, sat down next to Ron, and pulled him into a hug. "I'm sorry, Ron," she said through tears. "I'm really sorry, I had no idea..."

Fighting back emotion, Ron said, "Will you stop crying, you'll get me doing it."

Ginny was looking at Ron with great sympathy. "I think you know that Harry's never going to let that happen. He's not the type to get impressed by people grabbing for his attention, flattering him, whatever. He appreciates what the Aurors did because he wants to become one. But he resists being grabbed at pretty well. It's not going to happen."

"I kind of know that," said Ron, still being held by Hermione. "I know I'm being stupid, and that it's not going to happen like that. Like I said, I would have gotten over it. I guess it was just bad timing, and I didn't know I was being so obvious about how I felt."

Harry finally spoke. "Ron," he said quietly, "if someone asked me in an interview what the best day of my life was, I would say it was the day in first year when I took the Hogwarts Express to school. I made a friend, the first one I ever had." Now Ginny was almost crying as well. "I want you guys to be as much a part of my life as possible. I need you, I depend on you. You're what got me through the stuff this year. No matter how much I get pulled, I'm never going to-"

"All right, all right, Harry, I know," said Ron, withdrawing from Hermione's embrace, still fighting off his own tears. "Like I said, it would have gone away. Just a stupid feeling, is all it was."

"But it's still better to talk about things like that, Ron," said Hermione earnestly. "What if this kind of thing had happened more? You might have felt more and more like that, but not said anything, and started drifting away from Harry because of it. This can be the kind of thing that causes friendships to be lost. It really is a good idea to talk once in a while." Ron, still composing himself, had no reaction to Hermione's words.

"Sorry, Ron," said Harry. "I know you probably didn't need me to say that much, that you really knew it already. But it felt good to say it. So I suppose I was being selfish." Ron smiled, and the girls laughed.

"Yes, Harry, you're so well known for being selfish," Ginny teased. "So now, Hermione, since you practically pinned Ron down and forced him to say what he was thinking, I think it's only fair that you do too. You seemed to be angry at him way out of proportion to what was going on. Why were you so angry? What did you think he thought?"

"Well, I'm sure Ron doesn't care to know..." said Hermione hesitantly.

"No, after all that production, I really would like to know," said Ron. He looked at Hermione.

She sighed heavily. "I probably wouldn't have said anything, but now that I've done this, I suppose it's not fair of me not to tell you... I thought you were mad at Neville, that you didn't want him being more of a part of our group. He's been getting more comfortable with us, and us with him, and it's nice. This thing with Harry and the Aurors is bound to boost his confidence, make him feel better about himself, which he really needs. He's had a hard life. I thought that you were trying to shut him out."

Ron shook his head. "That was the last thing I was thinking, Hermione. I like Neville fine, I'm happy to have him as one of our group. It's nothing like that."

"I know, I know that now," she acknowledged. "And I'm sorry again for reacting like that."

"But why would you react like that anyway, Hermione?" asked Ginny. "Why would it be something that you would..." She trailed off as she saw the look on Hermione's face. "Oh, wow..." said Ginny suddenly, eyes wide.

"What?" asked Ron impatiently.

"I'm..." Hermione paused for a few seconds. "I have feelings for Neville which are more than friendship," she said. She looked around for people's reactions.

Harry felt totally stunned; he had not expected anything like this. "Wow... I had no idea..." He looked at Hermione, who looked anxious to know what people thought. "I'd never even thought about that before, but... Neville really is a good guy. I'm happy for you."

"Thank you, Harry, it means so much to me for you to say that. But this is still really early, I don't know what's going to happen. He doesn't know yet, of course. I'm kind of afraid to tell him. I don't know how he'll react."

"I would think he would be thrilled, Hermione," Harry said. Ginny nodded approvingly.

Hermione looked dubious. "I hope so, but you never know. Maybe he just doesn't look at me that way. Maybe he'll think he's not ready to have a girlfriend. I mean, Neville has gotten much less shy, but this is a pretty big thing. I just don't know what he'll do. I'm worried."

"I can understand that," agreed Ginny. "But I'm with Harry, I really think he'll be happy."

Ron looked like he was barely starting to understand what Hermione had said. "Well," he finally said, "I guess now I understand why you were so mad. I don't know what to say, Hermione, except that I hope it works out."

"Thank you, Ron," she said. "I'm glad you three feel like you do. I knew you would, I know we all like Neville, but I was still nervous, of course. I'm sure I still will be, until I tell him."

"You should tell him when we all get together," said Ginny enthusiastically. "There'll never be a better time for it, you know how hard it is to get privacy at the school. Just tell him you need to talk to him privately, take him into my room, and tell him. Maybe if he's interested, you could spend some time with him before school starts again, like you two could go to Diagon Alley together or something."

Hermione nodded. "That does make sense," she admitted. "I thought of that too. It's just... actually telling him is going to be nerve-racking. I've never done anything like this before. Part of me would have preferred to put it off, but you're right, now is the best time."

"First the Aurors, then you... he'll think he's died and gone to heaven," Harry said, smiling.

"Oh, Harry, that's so sweet of you to say," Hermione said gratefully. "I hope you're right, I really do. Now I just want... what's the day he's coming over? Thursday? Now I just want Thursday to be here, so I don't have to worry about it anymore, it'll just be done. Oh, I'm so nervous."

"He will be too, Hermione, once you tell him," said Ron, grinning.

Harry nodded. "I think you can expect astonishment, a bit like I felt when Dumbledore asked me to take the teaching job. He may need you to confirm what you said. I mean, if any girl came up to me and said what you're going to say to him, I'd need some time to-"

"Run away?" asked Ginny, smiling. Ron laughed out loud.

"I'm the brave Harry Potter, I do not run away," he said with exaggerated dignity as the rest laughed. "Think about how I felt, is what I was going to say. Also think about whether I felt brave enough to have a girlfriend. At least that won't be something Neville has to worry about."

"How would you feel, Ron?" Ginny asked. Harry wasn't sure if she was really curious or just wanted to tease Ron.

"If it was Hermione, you mean?" he asked. Harry and Ginny laughed.

Hermione sniffed and said, "Oh, you're so nice, Ron, what girl wouldn't want you?" causing Harry and Ginny to laugh more.

"No, just a girl you liked," clarified Ginny, "but who you had no idea would be interested in you."

"I don't know... I suppose go out a few times and see what happened," Ron said. "It would really depend on who it was, of course. It's just hard to say."

There was silence for a minute. Then Ginny said, "Wow, this is so strange... Now even I feel like I can't wait for Thursday to get here, I want to know what happens. I can really understand how Hermione feels."

"Well, let's talk about something else," said Hermione. "Maybe I'll get distracted and I won't be so nervous." They talked about other things, and Harry showed them some of what he'd learned over the past few days. He, too, couldn't help but wonder what would happen on Thursday.

Harry woke up on Wednesday, Christmas morning, to see Ron still sleeping in his bed on the other side of the room. Harry could have stayed in Fred and George's old room, but he and Ron preferred to sleep in the same room so they could talk as late as they wanted. Harry started to walk out of the room quietly, but Ron said, "I'm up, just not up enough to get out of bed." Harry waited until Ron got up, and they went downstairs.

Everybody was at the dining room table, including Fred and George, who greeted Harry and Ron. "Oh, good, you're up, I was just about to call you down," said Molly, dishing out breakfast onto people's plates. "I remember when you lot were little, nothing could keep you from rushing to the tree and tearing your presents open."

"Sorry, Mum, but we grew up," said George.

"But we still have our boyish charm," added Fred.

"So how were your Christmas sales?" asked Harry as he sat down.

"Excellent, Harry, thank you for asking," said Fred. "Yesterday was our busiest day ever. The day before Christmas, so naturally, but it was still impressive. We hardly got a chance to sit down all day."

"Three months later, Harry, but people still mention your name, and what you said in that article," said George. "Thanks again."

"That did even better for us than the Special Services award," agreed Fred. "They don't mention those in the paper."

"Couldn't have had them mention us on the back of your Chocolate Frog card, though?" joked George. Harry laughed. "We don't usually sell them, but we're going to just for January. Not absolutely in keeping with the motif of the shop, mind you, but we're sure they're going to be a big seller. I just wish we could advertise it in the window now, let people know we'll have them, but they're not being announced until the day before they're actually released on the second of January."

"You should come down to the shop then, Harry, have a bit of a meet and greet with your adoring public," urged Fred. Ron and Ginny laughed at the idea that that was something Harry would want to do.

"Good idea, Fred," said Harry agreeably. "I haven't had nearly enough people stare at me all my life. Very thoughtful of you."

"It's no problem, Harry, really," said Fred.

"It's just the way we are," added George.

The conversation around the table mainly centered around the twins and their shop, as they weren't around the Burrow so much. After breakfast, everyone went into the living room and sat down near the tree. Harry enjoyed watching the Weasleys open their presents. Arthur was delighted with his gift from Harry: a portable compact-disc player, twenty batteries, and ten compact discs. Harry explained how the player worked, and the Weasleys were very interested in how the disc spun in the player. Harry said, "The twenty batteries won't last forever, of course... is there a way to recharge batteries by using magic?"

"I believe, Harry," said George, "that you have thrown down a gauntlet which Dad will not be able to stop himself from picking up."

"Now that I have something to use the batteries with, I think I'll find a way, Harry. Thank you very much," said Arthur.

"As for the compact discs," added Harry, "of course I didn't have a clue what you would like, so I told them your gender and age and had them include what's most common for people like you to buy."

"What age did you tell them he was, Harry?" asked Ginny, grinning.

"I knew someone was going to ask me that as soon as I said the word 'age,'" said Harry. "I thought it would be Fred or George, though."

"What, I can't have a go at you?" asked Ginny.

"Of course, Ginny. I wouldn't want you any other way." The Weasleys laughed. Then Molly said, "So, what age did you-"

She was interrupted by louder laughter from the rest of the family. Harry smiled at Molly. "You, too, I see... well, I'll whisper it to you, and you can tell them if I'm not off by more than five years." He leaned over and whispered, "Forty-eight." She chuckled and repeated it to the room. "Not bad, Harry," said Arthur. "Only off by one year, I'm forty-nine. I assume you went by the ages of the children."

Harry nodded. "I'm pretty bad at telling ages."

"Want to guess my age, Harry?" asked Molly, now enjoying herself. There was more laughter.

"Let's put it this way: I'd rather go down to Diagon Alley and sign autographs for an hour," Harry replied. Molly laughed and mussed his hair. She leaned forward and picked up a card, which was Harry's gift to her. She opened it up. Harry had written: "Dear Molly, I lost my mother at a very young age. But I was lucky, because I found another really good one later on. You've always been so good to me, and I wanted to let you know how important it's been to me. Thank you very much for everything you've done for me. I love you. Love, Harry."

She turned to him, eyes already moist with tears, and pulled him to her, hugging him tightly. "I love you too, Harry," she said. Harry hugged her back tightly, and whispered, "I really mean it." She nodded, looked at him proudly, and kissed him on the cheek. Arthur had picked up and read the card silently. "That was very sweet, Harry, thank you," he said, smiling.

Ginny was smiling as well. "I assume, Harry, that whatever you wrote is something you couldn't have managed to write last year?" Harry chuckled. "Yes, that's safe to say," he agreed. He saw the twins grin at each other but say nothing.

Molly reached and took two more cards, from Harry to Ron and Ginny, and handed them over. Taking in their expressions, Fred said, "This should be good. Ginny is hoping Harry said something to her like he said to Mum-"

"-and Ron is afraid that he did," finished George.

Ginny opened hers first, and read silently. Harry had written, "Dear Ginny, I really do wish you were the same year as us. You're as important to me as anyone, and I'm very happy for whatever time we get to spend with you. I'm glad you like my new direction. You're great, and I love you. Love, Harry." She smiled and stepped over for her hug. "It's a very, very good direction, Harry," she said as she hugged him.

As she stepped back, George said, "Yes, I think Ron's looking pretty nervous right about now."

Ron gave them an annoyed look and opened his card. To Harry's surprise, he read his out loud. "Dear Ron, I wanted to express my gratitude for your friendship, but I know that emotional displays make you uncomfortable. I respect that, and so I won't write anything that would embarrass you. I'll just say Happy Christmas, and have a good year. Regards, Harry. P.S. I love you."

The Weasleys burst out in loud laughter, and even Ron laughed after giving Harry an obligatory annoyed look. "Oh, Harry, that was really good," Ginny said between laughs. "Very well done."

Harry felt wonderful. This is what Christmas should be like, he thought. He felt very lucky.

"Hey, there's something in mine," said Ron. He took out a small piece of paper and started reading it. "There's one in Ginny's, too," Harry said. "It's the same thing. They're gift certificates for a department store in London, I mean Muggle London, of course. I was hoping we could all go, you could use those, we could make a day of it."

"That's very nice, Harry," said Ginny. "The card is the best gift, though."

"Somehow I don't think Ron's going to be inclined to agree with that," said George.

"In the amount of one hundred pounds," read Ron from the certificate. "How much is that in Galleons?"

"I thought you weren't supposed to ask how much a gift cost," replied Harry with amusement. Ron rolled his eyes. "I'm pretty sure it's less than what your father's stuff cost, if that makes you feel any better," Harry half-assured, half-chided Ron. "I just thought it might be interesting for you to go shopping in a Muggle store. You can get all types of stuff, that's the good thing about department stores. So you should be able to find something you like."

"So, when should we go?" asked Ron. Harry was grateful that he had dropped the subject of the cost, for now at least.

"How about Friday?" asked Ginny. "Tomorrow we have everyone coming over, so that's probably the best time." Harry and Ron agreed. They continued opening presents, but Harry felt that just being at the Burrow was the best gift he could have hoped for.

The rest of Christmas Day was equally pleasant; Harry entertained Fred and George by showing more of what the Aurors had taught him. Ron expressed frustration that as he was still underage, he couldn't practice dueling with Harry

until they got back to Hogwarts. Fred and George could, but neither of them lasted more than ten seconds against Harry, to Ron's amusement. ("Well, we didn't get any instruction in seventh year, did we?" pointed out George.) They flew around on their brooms for a while, fooling around, doing Quidditch moves, Ginny having joined them. "We just need two more Chasers, and we've got a pretty good Quidditch team here," said George. Later they had a large and filling Christmas dinner, also attended by Bill and Charlie. Harry thought he saw on Molly's face a few times her sadness at Percy's absence, but she never said anything about it. Harry hoped that she and Arthur weren't arguing about it.

That evening, they all sat in the living room drinking eggnog and talking. At one point, they were interrupted by the sound of what was obviously a boggart in a large chest in the corner. Molly got up to get rid of it, but Harry asked her to leave it for him to do tomorrow. He explained that he was thinking of using a boggart in a few of his classes, as Lupin had, and wanted to practice on this one first. She agreed, and from then on their conversation was punctuated by the occasional thump. Harry was pleased to see that Arthur had already been working on the compact disc player; not only had he discovered how to recharge the batteries, but had found a way to play the audio over the air, even in the absence of speakers. One of the compact discs had been of Christmas songs, and they listened to that as they talked. Again, Harry couldn't have felt more at home.

At 4:00 on Thursday, Harry, Ron, and Ginny sat in the Weasley living room, waiting for their guests. Fawkes had joined Harry, and was currently on his shoulder. At a few minutes before four, Pansy walked out of the fireplace. She cheerfully greeted them, and sat down with them and talked. Neville showed up five minutes later, and Hermione five minutes after that. Harry felt that Hermione was dressed a little more nicely than was usual for her, but he thought it could have been his imagination. Neville and Pansy were given a tour of the house, after which they sat and talked in the living room until dinner.

Pansy and Neville seemed a bit overwhelmed by the experience, especially at dinner. "I don't think I've ever eaten with this many people, except at Hogwarts," she said, and was seconded by Neville.

"Oh, this isn't that much, Pansy," said Molly, just sitting down after making sure everyone had enough food. "It used to be that we had more than this, just with the immediate family."

"I'm an only child," Pansy said. "It must be interesting to be in such a large family. I guess it hasn't been quiet around here most of the time."

Molly nodded. "I must admit I'm dreading Ginny leaving home," she said wistfully. "There have been children here for over twenty-five years. The idea of just Arthur and I here makes me sad. No offense, dear."

Arthur chuckled in response. "That's all right, I know I'm not the most exciting person in the world," he said with a smile. "That's what the kids were for."

Molly continued, "I must say, we were hoping to have a grandchild by now, but no such luck. I try not to badger Bill and Charlie about not being married yet."

"I'm sure they appreciate your restraint, dear," said Arthur wryly. She frowned at him as Ron and Ginny chuckled.

"Seven children, you'd expect we'd have loads of grandchildren," she said. "Within ten years, for sure. Ron, Ginny, Harry, keep that in mind." Harry looked a bit startled to be included. "Yes, Harry," she said to him, "you are a member of this family, after all. Any child you have, I will consider a grandchild, so you remember that."

Harry saw Hermione and Pansy looking at him fondly, obviously touched by what Molly had said. "I will, Molly," he said. "As soon as Voldemort's dealt with, I'll get right on it."

"I know you're joking, but I hope you won't wait for that. We have to live our lives, after all. Even you, target on your head notwithstanding." Harry just nodded, as it was easier than arguing.

"Don't worry, Harry, nothing's going to happen to you," said Hermione. "You have us, remember?"

"Yes, it's hard to argue with that," he conceded. "Actually, that reminds me of something I wanted to mention at some point. Something the Aurors said. We were talking, and somehow the subject of how you guys saved me at Hogsmeade came up. Neville said, 'Thank goodness we had already studied the Diffusion Shield.' They just looked at each other like they knew something we didn't. I spent the next few minutes trying to get them to tell me what they were thinking. Finally Cassandra said that the Diffusion Shield is, as far as they're concerned, a much less important spell, because of how rarely it comes into use. They were very surprised that Dumbledore taught it to us at all, never mind in the first lesson. She said they all thought that Dumbledore taught it to us specifically so that it could be used to save me, and for no other reason."

There was silence around the table, and many surprised looks. Finally Molly said, "Well, neither Arthur nor I are experts on this sort of thing, but isn't it possible that Dumbledore just has a different opinion of this spell than they do, and he just thought it was a good thing for them to know?"

"I asked that," said Neville. "They dismissed the idea immediately. They seemed really sure, and they are the experts on this sort of thing. They're absolutely sure that he taught it to us so we could save Harry. I said, 'so, even if he did, what's wrong with that?' Cassandra said that they thought it was morally questionable, since because the shield's effect against the Killing Curse was so unpredictable, just teaching us the spell was like deliberately putting our lives at risk. They're sure he wouldn't have taught it to us if not for Harry."

"But that doesn't make sense," said Hermione. "If I'd been the one targeted, you guys would have done it for me, including Harry, then he would be at the same risk we had been."

"Harry said that," said Neville. "They said that the whole point is that Dumbledore had to know, or could guess very accurately, that Harry would be the one targeted. They said, Harry's the Death Eaters' number one target, and if they can take a shot at anyone, it's totally obvious it'll be Harry. Harry and I thought of three or four arguments, and they shot down each one. They were really sure. Kingsley said, 'It worked out for the best, so maybe this is just Dumbledore being wise beyond what we can understand. But it seemed like an awful chance. Neville and the others could be dead.' Of course I told him I was glad he taught it to us, and the rest of you were too. He said, 'I know, that's what makes it morally questionable.'"

"So, that's kind of bothered me," Harry said. "I mean, it's hard enough for me to accept people risking their lives for me, much as I appreciate what you did," and he looked at Ron, Hermione, and Neville in turn. "But the idea that he deliberately put you at such huge risk for my sake is kind of disturbing."

"But Harry, he didn't put us at risk," protested Hermione. "We did that, we chose to. All he was doing was giving us the means to do what he knew we would have wanted to do. He knew we would want to take the risk. If there was a safer way of stopping the Killing Curse, he would have taught it to us. But there isn't, so he did what he could. You told us that he's been conscience-stricken many times after asking or allowing people to take risks that ended up getting them killed, but that he also understood that those people made their own choices and were proud of them. He understands that, and I'm sure he would have been terribly upset if we had been killed, and blamed himself. But he also knew it was our choice, and that we would want the ability to make the choice we wanted. I don't see anything morally questionable about that."

"I told them that was how I felt," said Neville, "and that you and Ron would too. And I don't mean to exclude you two," he said, looking at Pansy and Ginny, "because I know you would have done it if you'd been there. Anyway, I got kind of annoyed, because it was as though I wasn't responsible for what I did, as if you two

and I were Dumbledore's puppets or something. I said that even if he did do it deliberately, there was still nothing wrong with it, because Harry has to be kept alive, at any cost. If he's the one who can beat Voldemort, losing a hundred people to keep him alive is worth it."

Harry looked mortified. "God, Neville, don't say that, I can't even deal with thinking about that. I don't know if I could function if that happened."

The rest looked at him sympathetically. Ron said, "I agree with Neville, of course, both about the Diffusion Shield and keeping Harry alive. It could end up saving hundreds or thousands of lives. You could easily argue that what Dumbledore did was for the greater good, and so morally okay."

"I agree, of course, Ron," said Arthur. "But you have to keep in mind that it's possible for something to be for the greater good and still be morally questionable. Remember our conversation from Monday night." He briefly summarized it for Neville and Pansy, who hadn't been there, then continued. "In fact, quite often what is for the greater good is morally questionable. So they have a reasonable point."

"It does seem to me," said Molly, "that when they have that discussion, they forget how many lives Dumbledore is holding in his hands, so to speak. Fudge may have the political authority, but Dumbledore is the one with the moral authority, the one people will die for. That's a huge burden, one I doubt they fully appreciate. He has to think about who will die because of what he did, or because of what he didn't do. Like Neville said, Harry's life could be worth hundreds. Maybe that doesn't affect the strict question of whether what Dumbledore did was moral or not, but it's ridiculous to not consider it at all. If you're responsible for the lives that are lost, of course you're going to consider it."

Everyone seemed to agree with this, and no one said anything for a moment. Then Harry said. "Anyway, I will ask Dumbledore about this thing with the Diffusion Shield. Much as I hate to see you risk your lives like that, I understand how you feel, since I'd want to for you, I'd want to know I had that option. So I'm not going to be angry at him for helping you risk your lives. I just want to know how he would respond to the Aurors' feelings about it."

There was silence for a few seconds, as no one had anything more to say on the topic. Then Pansy asked, "Mr. Weasley, you work for the Ministry... what's the attitude there right now? How do they feel about what Harry's doing?"

"It may be that I'm not the best person to ask, Pansy," said Arthur, "because it's so well known that Harry's very close to us, nobody's going to say anything bad about Harry directly to me. But some people tell me what others say. It seems that a lot of people admire and support him. But the problem is, some of those people-who I don't necessarily doubt are telling the truth-are the same ones who were fine with

the trashing he took in the Prophet last year. So his support may be wide, as they say, but I'm not sure how deep it is. There are plenty of opportunists, people who'll flow whichever way the wind is blowing. Still, it's an improvement over last year. We just have to hope the wind doesn't change direction."

"It's not likely to, is it?" Pansy asked. "I mean, now that everyone knows that Voldemort's back, isn't the Ministry going to be focused on stopping him?"

"I hope so, Pansy, and probably yes," replied Arthur. "I've just been at the Ministry too long to take anything for granted. I mean, I should explain, I work there but I don't have a lot to do with it. See, I'm well known for being fond of Muggles—too fond, many think—and I'm happy to work in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, which is considered a career backwater, someplace you get put if you're not in favor. I have no chance of advancing, and I don't care. I'm happy with what I do, and I'd want no part of high-level politics anyway. My point is, my only real connection to the Ministry is that I work there, not because of any influence I might have over anything. But of course I hear a lot of things. And yes, they are focused on stopping Voldemort, but people still jockey for influence, and put their personal interests above stopping Voldemort. Some people, anyway." He had an especially dark look.

"Wonder who he means," said Ginny to Ron, quietly. Ron grunted in agreement.

"That's enough, you two," said Molly.

"It's not only him," said Arthur. "I didn't even mean him specifically, but the shoe fits. It's a lot of people, and it gets stronger the higher up the ladder you go."

"Excuse me, I'm sorry," said Pansy, "but... him who?"

Molly looked upset at Ron, Ginny, and Arthur. Arthur didn't appear to be bothered, though he could obviously tell. "Sorry, Pansy, I know you and maybe Neville don't know about this. Hermione, you do, of course." She nodded somberly.

"Everybody at the Ministry knows, Molly, I don't see why it should be any secret."

"I know it's not a secret, it's just not something I like to discuss at the dinner table," replied Molly unhappily. She clearly knew an explanation had to be given.

"They're talking about Percy, our third son," said Arthur. He went on to explain what had happened. "So he'll probably rise fairly quickly in the Ministry, since his actions have made it clear to Fudge and people like him that it's the Ministry's interests he'll look out for and nobody else's, including his family. It's hard for us, it's almost like having a death in the family. Now he talks to Molly occasionally, since she's the only family member who'll talk to him without an apology on his part. He acts like he wants to be a part of the family again, and maybe he does, but he seems to have no concept of how he betrayed us, and no remorse for it. I can't forgive him for what he did unless he understands it was wrong. If he really doesn't think it was wrong, then there's just nothing to say."

"Harry, dear," said Molly, who then smiled sadly at the look of alarm that crossed Harry's face. "I'm sorry, I can see that you don't want to be asked, but you are a family member, and I want to know what you think."

"Are you sure you don't know some people who'd like autographs instead?" he nervously joked, then paused before speaking. "Molly, I don't blame you for feeling like you do. He's your son, and I can't know what that feels like. But me, I'm like them, I wouldn't talk to him unless he'd realized what he'd done. He knew me personally, he knew I wasn't some nutter. He knew Dumbledore, what kind of person he is. He made a deliberate choice, and because of people like him, we got a late start on fighting Voldemort. Who knows how many lives that could cost. He chose himself over you, over what was right. It's not too late for anyone to change their choices, and if he did, I'd welcome him, if I thought he was genuine. People make mistakes. But to me, to forgive what he did to the family that easily means that it didn't matter. It matters a lot, I think."

Molly looked at him, then said, "Don't worry, Harry, I'm not going to be angry at you. Everyone else in the family has said what you said, more or less. I see the point, of course. It's just harder for me to see it that way. Maybe mothers are just too soft. And while I'll talk to him without preconditions, I did make sure he knew he couldn't be welcomed back until he had made substantial amends. I think he wants to, he just can't get himself to do it. Too much pride."

"He only wants to," said Ron heatedly, "because we're on the right side now, as far as he's concerned. If Fudge hadn't seen Voldemort with his own eyes, Percy would still be laughing along with the people sticking it to Harry and Dumbledore in the Prophet. You remember what he said about Harry in that letter."

"Well, I think this is enough of that," Molly said. "Pansy, Neville, Hermione, you shouldn't have had to listen to that." She cast a stern glance at Ginny, who she obviously held responsible for starting the topic.

"It's all right, Mrs. Weasley," said Neville. "We don't mind. We feel bad for you, but we don't mind."

Molly smiled at him. "Thank you, Neville, you're a sweetie." Harry exchanged a smile with Hermione. "You know," said Molly, no doubt eager for a chance to change the subject, "we had a chance to talk to your grandmother in November. She's a very distinguished lady. And she was very proud of you."

"I know, she told me," said Neville embarrassedly. "But I think she was as proud of me for mentioning my parents in the article as she was for me helping to save Harry."

"I read that, Neville," said Pansy. "That was very brave of you. You knew that what happened later would happen. I'm sure that wasn't easy." She went on to explain to Arthur and Molly what had happened in the Herbology class.

"It shouldn't take that much bravery, really," said Neville. "Especially by sixth year, it's not the kind of thing most people are going to make fun of you for. They know better by then. I should know enough not to care what people like Malfoy say. Anyway, Harry's been taking stuff off him for years. He deals with it."

"He never made fun of my having lost my parents, though," pointed out Harry.

"C'mon, Harry, you're the Boy Who Lived," replied Neville. "If he had, the whole school would've beaten him to death. He knew he couldn't do that. But he would've if he could've."

"He did in the Slytherin common room," said Pansy. "Even there it wasn't really popular. But anyway, Neville, I still think it was brave."

"We all think so, Neville," said Hermione. Molly nodded.

"Well, fortunately, most people have been really good about it, so that was nice," said Neville. "Not that I'm eager for unsolicited sympathy, as I've already told these three, but I know they mean well."

There seemed to be nothing more to say on that topic, so Arthur tried a new one. "Say, I noticed there were quite a few owls this morning. Did we just get a lot of mail, or-"

"That was Harry," said Ginny. "Thank-you letters from his first years." To their parents' quizzical looks, she explained what he had done. "I think he got about twenty-five or so."

"It was almost embarrassing," said Harry. "No, not almost, it was embarrassing. I have a very hard time getting used to stuff like that."

"I read some of it, and I thought it was great," said Ginny. "Okay, they got a bit carried away, but I enjoyed reading it."

"I can only imagine what his Slytherins said," said Pansy. "Sometimes I talk to them in their dormitories. I do get the impression that Harry is a godlike figure to them." She smiled at him teasingly. "I encourage this sort of thinking, of course."

The Weasleys, Hermione, and Neville all laughed, while Harry stared at her, trying to pretend to be annoyed. "I love to tease Harry," continued Pansy. "But really, Harry, they put you on a Chocolate Frog card, you drove Voldemort off, you invented this great new spell, and they're eleven years old. Can you really expect any other reaction? Not to mention, they get a personalized card from you. Not only legendary, but thoughtful too. I wouldn't mind seeing those letters either, come to think of it."

"Maybe if you promise not to make fun of me," said Harry.

"C'mon, that would be the best part," replied Pansy. "You're cute when you're embarrassed."

"I think I remember Tonks saying that on the last day," said Neville, smiling.

"Now, don't you start," Harry said, pointing a finger at Neville, to more laughter. He sighed. "This would be so much easier if I were egotistical."

"If you were egotistical, Harry, they wouldn't love you the way they do," said Arthur. "They can tell that you're not."

"Well, why is it that I can't enjoy that kind of thing?" Harry asked, almost plaintively. "It just embarrasses me. You'd think someone who people felt that way about would just enjoy it. All I want to do is run away."

Nobody spoke for a moment. Then Hermione said seriously, "Does that bother you, Harry? That you can't enjoy it?"

Harry shrugged. "I'm not sure I would say that, exactly, but I guess it makes me feel like there's something wrong with me, like this isn't how most people would react."

To Harry's surprise, Ron spoke. "Not everyone can be Lockhart, mate. I'd be embarrassed too, I think. But now the problem is, it's not just being the Boy Who Lived anymore. You did something phenomenal in September-sorry, I know you don't like hearing that, but it's true-and now even if somebody exaggerates when they praise you, there's at least some truth in there. I think one problem is that you don't see what you did in September the same way others do. I mean, Hermione and I were awestruck, and we know you better than anybody. We know your faults and flaws, we have a perspective. Most people don't know you like that. They only see the stuff that's amazing, and they probably think that's the way you are in every way. So they don't see the ordinary parts of you, and you don't see the exceptional parts of you. No wonder you and they see you so differently."

Everyone looked at Ron. "That was very impressive, Ron," said Hermione, clearly trying not to sound like her compliment was a backhanded put-down. "He's right, of course, Harry. You may need to adjust your ego to account for the impressiveness of what you did. Then you might be able to enjoy it a little. Of course, you shouldn't enjoy it too much, either. There's not much danger of that, though. But you did something remarkable. There's no reason you should have to be embarrassed about enjoying it, or enjoying the reactions from it."

"Harry, I'm sorry," said Pansy, looking serious. "I shouldn't have made fun of you being so modest. I didn't know this actually bothered you. Maybe I should just give up making fun of anybody, altogether."

"No! Don't do that," said Harry urgently, surprising her. "Pansy, I like it that you tease me the way you do. It's how I know you're comfortable with me. I'd be really upset if you stopped. You're getting down on yourself again about your past, but this is nothing like that. You mean it affectionately." He looked into her eyes.

She looked back for a few seconds, then smiled. "You're cute when you're earnest, Harry." He smiled back. "Yes, you're right, I do bring up my past too quickly when I beat myself up about something. It's just so easy to do. So I'll try not to, and you work on that modesty thing."

Harry reluctantly nodded. "Okay, I'll try, if only so you'll stop beating yourself up."

Molly smiled. "So, you two have only known each other for three months now? Seems like a lot longer."

Pansy explained how they'd met once or twice a week to talk, and why. "It's been a very concentrated three months. So it feels like a lot longer." She sighed, then said, "Oh, I dread January. Malfoy gets out of his little prison, and I have to start acting like I care again." She looked at Harry sharply, as if in warning.

"What did he do?" asked Neville curiously.

"It's what he was going to do," replied Pansy.

"I wasn't going to!" Harry protested.

"Yes, but you wanted to."

"Yes, but I didn't. Don't I get some credit for that?"

Now she smiled, and explained to the rest. "Harry wants me to come out in the open, because he cares more for my comfort than for his safety. But I still think that Malfoy wants to kill him if he gets a chance, so I won't come out in the open. I can do a lot of good where I am. But Harry, you need to understand," she said, sounding serious now, "that what I'm doing is difficult. You help a lot, and now so do Hermione and Ginny. But it's still hard. I chose to do it, I want to do it. But sometimes I need to be able to complain without you telling me every single time to come out in the open. It makes me feel like I shouldn't complain, but I feel like I need to. Does that make any sense?"

Harry nodded guiltily. "I'm sorry, Pansy. It's not that I mind you complaining, it's just that..."

"You worry about me, I know. Harry, I really can take care of myself. Please, try not to worry so much."

"That's kind of hard. I know what I should do, of course. When you complain, I should say, 'Pansy, what you're doing for me is wonderful, and I really appreciate it.'"

"Yes, that would be about right," she said. "That would help. Now you just have to remember to say it."

Now Arthur was smiling. "It's just like a married couple, isn't it?" he said to Molly.

She nodded. "They have their sore spots, their issues, and they know what they are, it's just hard to change."

"But they want to try, both of them. I admire that," said Arthur. "A lot of married people don't want to put that kind of effort into it."

The students were looking at them in various degrees of surprise. "What, are you saying you think they're going to end up married?" asked Ron.

The Weasley parents laughed. "No, that's not what we mean," said Molly. "What we mean is that the dynamic we've seen between them in the last few minutes is a common one for married couples. When you get married, or are in a relationship, you're bound to rub each other the wrong way in some areas. It takes some work to discover what they are, and then you have to work out how to deal with it. Both people have to try pretty hard to change, or the stuff that upsets one of them keeps happening."

"See, for example," continued Arthur, "it upsets Harry when Pansy won't forgive herself about her past, because he has, and he wants her to. He doesn't want her to think that he blames her for anything." Arthur looked at Harry, who nodded. "And it upsets Pansy when Harry suggests she come out in the open, because she feels like it means he doesn't appreciate or take seriously what she does, which is very difficult. She feels like he's saying, 'if it's too tough, then just quit,' which is not what she means." Pansy nodded. "So their natural tendencies-hers to criticize herself, his to worry-affect the other in ways they didn't expect. So that has to be dealt with. And that's exactly how it is with married couples."

"Also," added Molly, "you two have a... comfort level, and an emotional intimacy, which usually takes longer than three months to develop. And I especially liked how Pansy picked up on Harry wanting to say what she's come to expect him to say, even though he didn't say it, and criticizing him anyway. That's very typical. I know I've done that to Arthur more than a few times."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, darling," he replied, and they laughed.

Pansy looked very impressed. "It's amazing how you put all that together so fast."

"Just part of being married," said Arthur modestly. "Well, being successfully married, anyway. Lots of couples don't try that hard, and they end up emotionally distant from each other."

"Sounds like my parents," she said sadly. "They're both kind of... overly formal people, don't show their feelings much. I can't imagine them trying to work out the

psychology of what was going on, or try to understand what the other was thinking. They just don't work like that. It makes me feel kind of sad for them, actually."

Arthur shrugged. "Different people are comfortable with different things. Maybe your parents are happy with how they've worked things out. It's just hard to know."

"One thing I do know," said Pansy, "is that they wouldn't have listened to Harry and I bicker and thought it was cute and explained the dynamic; they'd have told us to be quiet. They wouldn't have talked about something as sensitive as the Percy situation even to each other, never mind around other people. And they wouldn't be so friendly to someone they barely knew."

Molly and Arthur smiled, touched. "Thank you, Pansy, that's so sweet," said Molly. "First Harry's card, now this, I really am going to get embarrassed."

"Harry's card?" asked Pansy.

"Harry wrote cards for Ron, Mum, and I," Ginny explained. "The ones to me and Mum were very nice, heartfelt, and the one to Ron was a classic. Ron, go get the card Harry gave you."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Why should I? He's just having a go at me."

"No, Ron," Ginny explained patiently, "He's expressing heartfelt sentiment and having a go at you, at the same time. It was brilliant. Now go get it, or I will."

Ron groaned and started to get up from the table, but then had a thought. "Harry, you're not subject to the underage restriction anymore. Just Summon it. It's near my bed, with all my other Christmas stuff."

Harry took out his wand, focused on the card, and silently Summoned it. It arrived in a few seconds, and he caught it and handed it to Ron. "No, you read it," said Ron. "You're the one who wrote it, so it makes more sense."

Harry did so, and was rewarded with loud laughter from Pansy, Hermione, and Neville. "Oh, Ginny's right, that is a classic. Keep that card, Ron," chuckled Hermione.

"Oh, absolutely, Hermione, it'll be one of my most treasured possessions," said Ron sarcastically. Then, to Harry's surprise, he turned to Harry and smiled. "I will admit, though, it was funny. Thanks for putting the effort into it."

"Any time, Ron."

"What's this, Harry?" asked Hermione, pulling the paper out of the card. "Oh, it's a gift certificate! That's a good idea, Harry!"

"He didn't get you one?" asked Ron. "Both Ginny and I got them."

"Ron, this is a Muggle store, I can go there any time. He must've gotten them for you and Ginny so you could shop there. Were you going to go with them, Harry?"

"Yes, I was. You should come too. You've actually shopped in these places, whereas I've only seen them. You too, Neville, if you're free." He looked at Pansy, and his face fell. She smiled gamely.

"I know, Harry, you don't have to say it. I can see how bad you feel, and I appreciate it. But you're right. Much as I'd love to come along, even I recognize that it would be a huge and stupid risk. Tell you what, you just promise me that you'll all do something like this with me after I'm out in the open. How about it?"

"Sure, Pansy," said Ron, who also seemed to feel bad. The others nodded.

"Good, you can be sure I'll remember this," said Pansy.

Molly got up to start clearing away the dishes. Hermione tried to help, but Molly brushed her away.

"I'll help her, Hermione," said Arthur, "you all go on into the living room. Harry, you were going to use that boggart tonight?"

"Oh, yes, thank you, Arthur. Of course, I would have heard it thumping and remembered anyway. Thanks for letting it stay for a few days so I could use it." He and the others went into the living room.

"So, why are you keeping a boggart here, Harry?" asked Neville.

"I wanted to practice on it. I was thinking about using one the same way Remus did when he taught us. I was also thinking about using it to help teach the Patronus Charm. See," he said, now to Pansy, "When a boggart sees me, it becomes a dementor. I thought maybe I could open it, make sure I was the closest one to it, and then a student could try the Patronus Charm on it. That's how I learned."

"Not a bad idea, Harry," said Hermione. "Of course, you'd have to keep a decent distance. It's not going to be good if you faint, the students won't be able to get rid of it."

"Yeah, that's why I thought I'd practice," he agreed. "I want to make sure I can take care of it with no difficulty. I'm sure I can, though."

"I'm sure, too, Harry, but I'll stand by to grab Mum or Dad just in case," said Ginny. Remember, the underage thing, none of us are allowed to do anything."

He nodded. "Okay, now, stay a distance back from me. I'm going to open it." He looked at the chest in the corner of the room, but didn't come close to it. He waved his wand, and the door flew open.

A dementor did not come gliding toward him as he had expected. Instead, a body seemed to come flying out of the chest, landing a few feet away from Harry, who backed away reflexively. The body came to rest, face up.

It was Pansy, very clearly dead. The Pansy created by Harry's fears had not died easily. Her face was bruised in several places, and there was a gash in her chest, along with a fair amount of blood on her dress near the wound.

Harry gasped, and felt he could barely breathe. For a half of a second he thought it was the real Pansy, and was in shock. Then he turned and looked at the real Pansy, who was equally shocked, as were the rest. He looked back at the boggart, which was still in the form of the dead Pansy.

He staggered over to the sofa and sat down, tears starting to come up. It's not Pansy, he thought. It's just a boggart. Pansy is fine. But what he had seen, he could not dismiss easily. That could happen, he thought. He put his head in his hands.

Pansy walked over, looking mortified. She sat down next to him and looked into his eyes. She reached out and held him, and a few tears trickled down his cheeks. "Oh, Harry," she said. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry I ever criticized you for worrying, I'm so sorry..." She said it over and over again as she held him, his head buried in her shoulder.

He shook his head. "It's not your fault," he said. "It's just me, it's not your fault." He heard someone say "Riddikulus," and realized that Ginny must have called Molly.

"It is my fault," said Pansy, now near tears herself. "If I hadn't been so dismissive of your concern, maybe you wouldn't have worried so much. I'm sorry... I had no idea it was like this."

Harry shook his head, the tears stopping. "It's just a boggart," he said, as much to himself as to her. "I know you're going to be careful. Just me being stupid," he said, not wanting her to blame herself.

"It isn't stupid, Harry," said Molly gently, sitting on a chair near the sofa. "A person's worst fear is never stupid. And Pansy, it wasn't your fault," she said. "Harry was going to worry, no matter what reassurances you gave him. Believe me, I know what it's like to worry. He can't help it, it's just the situation you're in."

Harry took a few breaths, and looked up at the others. They looked stricken, imagining how it must have affected him. He looked at Pansy, and took her hands in his. "I know you want to do this," he said. "I respect it and I appreciate it. I know it could save my life. It's just hard for me not to think about that."

"I understand," she said. "I should have understood better... I guess I never really put myself in your shoes. I should have tried harder. I'm sorry, Harry..."

"It wasn't your fault that the boggart--"

"I know that," she said, sniffing. "I mean I'm sorry for not taking your concern that seriously. I just always thought, oh, he worries too much, I guess it's just this

thing he does. I didn't realize it was like this, that this was what you saw... I just never thought about it, and I should have. That's why I'm sorry. You can believe I'll take your concern more seriously from now on."

He nodded to indicate his appreciation. "I don't know what I can do... not much I guess, since I don't think I can stop worrying just like that. I'll just try to keep in mind that you're being careful." Harry didn't know how much good that would do, but he felt he had to recognize that just because he feared something didn't mean it was going to happen.

Molly leaned forward, rearranged Harry's hair affectionately, smiled at him, and kissed his forehead. She stood, then touched Pansy on the shoulder. "If you need anything, you let me know," she said, and left the room.

"Ron, Ginny," said Pansy. "I envy you two. She's very nice."

Ginny smiled, but Ron said, "You've never heard her yell."

"Sure I have," she said. "Second year, that Howler you got for taking the car."

Now Ron smiled a little. "Oh, yeah."

Hermione looked as if it had been an effort not to rush over and hug Harry for the past few minutes. She did so now, sitting where Molly had sat. "Poor Harry..." she said.

He looked at her appreciatively. "I'll be all right."

"I know," she said, "but... it's like what Dumbledore said, you have all these burdens, and this is one of them. I can only imagine what you felt when you woke up after the Diffusion and saw us in those beds, wondering if we'd ever get up. This really... brings that to life somehow." She let go of him, looking at him with concern and sorrow.

Neville walked over to behind the sofa. He didn't say anything, but leaned over and put a hand on Harry's shoulder.

Harry looked up and said, "Thanks, Neville."

Neville nodded and said, "Good thing you decided to practice first. Can you imagine if that had happened in front of a class?"

Harry shuddered at the thought. "It would have been bad, they would have had to get another teacher. Not to mention, Pansy's cover would have been blown." He shook his head. "Stupid of me not to assume it could change, I just thought it would be dementors forever. I didn't think about the fact that I'm actually not that scared of them anymore, because I'm good at the Patronus Charm now. But even if I had to try to guess what it would be, I wouldn't have guessed that. But it makes sense."

Neville nodded. "I have no idea what mine would be now, but I have a feeling it wouldn't be Snape anymore."

Pansy laughed out loud. "I heard about that. I would have loved to have seen it."

"It was very funny," affirmed Ron. "Of course, Neville paid for it. Snape was really, really awful to him after that."

"It wasn't like it made that much difference," said Neville. "He was always awful anyway."

"It's so strange," said Hermione. "You two don't have Potions anymore, so you don't see it, but now, Snape treats Harry perfectly politely in class. No snide comments, no sneers, even. I think it's as nicely as he's capable of treating anybody. It has to be because Harry's a teacher."

"It could be that," Harry agreed, thankful for the conversation to help get his mind off of the shape the boggart had assumed. "But I think it's also possible that Dumbledore asked him to do it, or made him do it. He doesn't have to treat me like a teacher when I'm in his class, but he does anyway."

"In my class, he's as nasty as ever," said Ginny.

"I haven't seen any change either," added Pansy. "Of course, he always favors Slytherins, so I wouldn't. He's still pretty unpleasant with the Ravenclaws in our class."

"That reminds me," said Harry, "I think I forgot to tell you before, but before the year started, I actually called him on that." He described what had happened at the teachers' meeting.

"Good for you, Harry," said Hermione. "Imagine that, him accusing you of singling out people. That's a laugh."

"Talk about the pot calling the cauldron black," agreed Ron.

"Flitwick and Sprout were really pleased," said Harry. "They both told me later that they appreciated it. They know how blatant he is, but there's not much they can do."

As they continued talking, everybody sat down, and the incident with the boggart gradually faded from their minds. They talked about school and exchanged Christmas-related experiences. After a few hours had gone by, during a lull in the conversation, Hermione looked at Neville. "Neville, could I talk to you for a minute?" Surprised, Neville nodded. "You can use my room," said Ginny. "You know where it is, Hermione." Hermione got up and left, followed by Neville.

No one said anything for a few seconds, until they were well out of range. Ginny exhaled. "I'm so nervous, and it isn't even me."

Harry nodded. "I know what you mean." He turned to Pansy. "See, what's going on, is--"

"I know what's going on, Harry. Hermione told me about this in the notebooks a few weeks ago."

"A few weeks ago?" Harry repeated in surprise. "We only found out a few days ago."

Pansy shrugged. "I think when you write to someone in a notebook like that, it's easier to say private stuff. You don't have to worry about being overheard. I really hope it goes all right too."

"Did she, um... tell you about how it came up that we found out?" asked Ron, clearly hoping to receive a negative answer.

Pansy smiled sympathetically. "Sorry, Ron. But she felt really bad about it, like she had invaded your privacy for no good reason."

"Yes, she feels bad for invading my privacy, so naturally she goes and tells another person."

Pansy looked at him earnestly. "Ron, I can be trusted. I'm not going to tell anyone, or make fun of you. I thought it was sweet that you worried about that. So did she, even though she felt bad."

"Pansy, it's not a question of whether I trust you," said Ron. "I do, just like they do. I just didn't even want to tell them. It's hard for me to talk about that kind of thing. Of course, she probably told you that, too."

"I did, too," said Ginny. Ron looked up in annoyance.

"Yes, you seem to be pretty well-known for it," said Pansy, smiling. "But I know how you feel. I was like that too, up until this year." She looked at them more seriously. "When I first came to talk to you in September, Harry, I was really nervous. Maybe as nervous as Hermione is right now. I wondered how I was going to convince you that I was genuine. I knew that I was going to have to... open up, in a way that I never really had before. It was hard, especially since I didn't know if you'd believe me. Since you were as understanding as you were-and I still thank you for that-I've gotten a bit more used to opening up about things. Especially after that time I hid under the Cloak in your office. Did you tell them about that?"

Harry shook his head, and Pansy told Ron and Ginny what had happened. "So I just cried on Harry's shoulder, it was like my whole past came up to haunt me all at once. I had never told anybody stuff like I told Harry that day, and he was so good about it. I think that helped me get used to talking about stuff like that, that I wasn't going to be made fun of, or dismissed. But I really do know how you feel, Ron. Who knows, you might change too."

Ron's expression suggested that he wasn't thrilled at the idea, but he said, "Being around you lot, it wouldn't shock me. But that thing with Malfoy... he's so despicable, I feel bad for you just hearing about it." Harry and Ginny glanced at Ron

in surprise, as it wasn't common for him to express sympathy like that. "I also get that you told me that kind of in return for what Hermione told you about me."

She nodded. "Yes, that's true. And thanks for your sympathy, but the fact is, I deserved it. When that happened, I didn't cry because he had contempt for me; I cried because I deserved that contempt, and I knew it. It was good that it happened, though. That cry helped me get most of it out of my system. I felt like all those years of being Malfoy's toady had... kind of poisoned me, and I had to get it out." She looked at Harry. "I wanted to say this when you were talking about Percy, but I didn't think it was my place. When you said what you said, that you could forgive him if he knew what he'd done and regretted it for the right reasons, I couldn't help but think of my situation. What you said you would do with Percy is exactly what you did with me."

"I'm sure Mum knows Harry meant it anyway, though," said Ginny. "To tell you the truth, though... and I'd never tell Mum this... but I don't care if he comes back or not. In some ways, I'd just as soon he didn't. He's very much the way you describe your parents to be, maybe even more so. He's just so... distant, even with family members."

"He's a jerk, is the way I'd put it," said Ron disgustedly. "I'm with Ginny, of course, I'd just as soon he didn't come back either. But I suppose if he really was repentant, I'd agree to his coming back. I just don't think it's going to happen."

The conversation turned to other things. After another half hour had passed, Ginny said, "I wonder how it's going up there."

"Well, I hope," said Pansy. "I hope Neville's smart enough to know how lucky he is."

Ron chuckled, then looked embarrassed at Pansy's inquiring glance. "Sorry, I didn't mean to do that. It's just... I'm not used to the idea that you're that close with Hermione. I know you have the notebooks and everything, but..."

Pansy looked at him sadly. "Because of how I used to make fun of her?"

Ron nodded. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have laughed. I know that must be a hard topic."

"My impulse is to say that I deserve it, which I do, but then Harry will get on my back, so I won't."

"Yet you did, anyway," said Harry.

"Sort of. But I do understand, Ron, and I don't think you were even thinking about the reason when you laughed. And yes, with the notebooks, I've discovered what a nice person Hermione is. She doesn't seem that way when you see her in class, she's so focused on knowing everything. And in person she can seem a bit bossy." Harry and Ron exchanged a smile. "Yes, I see you've thought that too," said Pansy.

"But the things I like about her are the kind you don't find out until you get to know her. Also, look at Neville. He's the kind of boy that a lot of girls say they want, but really don't. He's kind and gentle, and he'll be a great husband. They deserve each other."

"Thank you, Pansy, that's very nice of you to say," said Hermione, as she walked into the room with Neville, holding hands with him. Neville looked overwhelmed. "I agree, of course." She looked at Neville and smiled. She continued, "I know you all want a report... all I can say is that we're going to spend some of the day tomorrow together, and a few more times before vacation is over. But I've managed to convince Neville to give me a chance."

Now Neville looked very embarrassed. "Hermione, come on. It's more like the other way around."

The others all smiled, happy for them. "Scared, Neville?" asked Ron.

"Terrified," grinned Neville. "And very surprised. But very happy."

"Well, if you need advice, you can always ask my Mum and Dad," said Ron. "They seem to know a thing or two."

"Maybe we will," said Hermione. "So, what were you talking about while we were gone?"

"You, of course," said Pansy.

"I think the last thing was that Neville would make a great husband," added Ginny, smiling at Neville, who blushed even more than he already was.

Pansy smiled at Harry. "See, Harry, you're not the only one who's cute when he's embarrassed."

"I think I can't give an opinion on that," said Harry, straight-faced.

"This is what I get for saying what Tonks said about you," said Neville to Harry. "It didn't occur to me that anyone would say it about me."

"I wouldn't have thought so about me, either," Harry agreed. Realizing that for each of them the source of the embarrassment was having been complimented, he added, "We're being made fun of, but I suppose there are worse ways to be made fun of."

The next morning, Harry had to assure Molly repeatedly that he was all right, that the boggart experience was not still bothering him. Harry, Ron, and Ginny flew around outside for a while, and otherwise killed time until 1:15. Neville and Hermione came through the fireplace about five minutes late.

"Sorry we're late," said Neville. "My gran, you know..."

"We had lunch with her, at Neville's place," explained Hermione.

The others raised their eyebrows. "Bet that was fun," said Ron.

"I was a little worried," acknowledged Hermione, "but it wasn't that bad, really."

Neville agreed. "I was kind of worried too, I didn't know how she'd react to my bringing a girl home to meet her. I know better than anyone how she can be. But fortunately, she already had a high opinion of Hermione. She still acted strict, like she often does, but I knew she was pleased. Last night, when I told her what happened, she was really surprised. She told me some things, and they all kind of boiled down to the idea of, 'You've got something good, now don't mess it up.'" The others laughed.

"Excuse me, I have to use the bathroom before we go," said Hermione, and walked off.

"You have got something good, Neville," Harry said. "But somehow I don't think you're going to mess it up."

Neville looked at Harry seriously. "I still can't believe it, Harry, partly because... last night, I had a hard time falling asleep, so much was going on in my head. But one thing I kept thinking was, 'she wants me, and not Harry?' It's just hard to get used to that idea."

"You'd better get used to it, Neville," said Harry, embarrassed. "First of all, you know how close Hermione and I are, and always will be. But I think we've both always known that it would never be romantic. I'm not sure why, but it's true. Secondly, there's no reason for her not to prefer you over me. You're..." He paused, uncomfortable with the idea of telling Neville what he thought were his good qualities. "Ginny, will you please tell him? It'd be better coming from you."

Ginny grinned at him wickedly for a second before turning to Neville. "What Harry wants to say, Neville... well, what he doesn't want to say, really... is that like Pansy said, you're kind and gentle. You're also not afraid to deal with emotions, which girls find very appealing. You're a good person, and Hermione was clever enough to see that. She got you while you were still available."

Neville was, of course, very embarrassed. "I think I feel like Harry felt with what his first years were saying in letters. My opinion of myself is so different from Hermione's, and yours, that it's taking a lot for me not to assume Hermione just feels sorry for me or something. I know that's dumb, of course, but you see what I mean. You know how I used to be, part of me still sees myself that way."

"Well, Hermione doesn't," warned Ginny, "and if you don't stop, you're going to really annoy her by putting yourself down too much. That's not something that girls like, just so you know."

"Yes, I guessed that from last night," Neville said ruefully. "It took her almost a half hour to persuade me that I was good enough for her. I think she was getting impatient, but she managed."

"You'll be fine," said Harry. "You know, we're all really happy for you, for both of you."

"Thanks, Harry. That means a lot to me."

"So, what did you do this morning?" asked Ron.

"We just walked around Diagon Alley, visited the shops, nothing special. We talked a lot, and that was nice. Suddenly there seems to be a lot to talk about. We also visited your brothers' shop," he said to Ron and Ginny. "She told them about us, you should have seen their faces. It was pretty funny. They made a few jokes... I got the feeling that they wanted to make more than they did, but were being nice, for them."

Hermione walked back in during his last sentence. "Yes, for them. I was annoyed, though, because they treated Neville more like he used to be instead of who he is now. They don't know what he's been like this year; if they did, they wouldn't act like it was so strange. Not that he wasn't good last year, too, but you know what I mean. Anyway, I think they stopped making jokes because they figured out that they were annoying me, more than they meant to, probably. Then they were more nice about it."

"They mean well," said Ginny. "You know them, making jokes is their main way of communicating."

"Yes, I know," said Hermione, her tone making clear what she thought of that. "If either of them ever wants a woman in their life, they're going to have to change that."

"I wouldn't disagree with you," said Ginny. "So, are we ready to go?"

"I think so," said Harry. "Did you go to Gringotts earlier so Neville could exchange some Galleons for pounds?"

"No, I have pounds," said Hermione, "so I can just trade directly with him."

"And you can use some of my gift certificate, Neville," Ginny offered.

"Yeah, mine too," added Ron, with a sideways look at Harry. "I have a feeling it'll be more than I need."

Harry sighed, and tried not to roll his eyes. "I suppose I should be grateful that you didn't complain. I was afraid you would."

"I almost did," said Ron. "I may not know the exact exchange rate, Harry, but I'm not a moron. I know a hundred pounds isn't a small amount of money. But I decided to be nice to you, and not complain. I must have been overwhelmed by what you wrote in the card." They all laughed.

"My first thought was to make it two hundred each," said Harry. "It was only worrying about your reaction that made me take it down to one hundred."

"Harry," said Ginny, "next time, give him the one hundred and give me the two hundred. I'm not nearly so proud as he is."

Harry chuckled. "I'll keep that in mind, believe me."

"Well, let's get going, we can talk along the way," suggested Hermione. They stepped through the fireplace one by one, and continued their conversation in Diagon Alley.

"Can I ask, what's the problem with Harry giving you guys a gift certificate?" asked Neville. "I mean, he's got lots of money, he can afford it." Harry noticed that Neville and Hermione were holding hands.

"See, Neville," answered Ginny, "our family has never had much money, and it can be hard to accept money and expensive things when you're in that situation, because it makes you feel bad that you can't reciprocate. Harry wouldn't want us to feel like that, but it can be hard not to."

"It's all part of the wonderful lifestyle of not having money, Neville," added Ron. "Even if somebody wants to be nice, it's hard to accept it. I almost wish I didn't feel this way, but I do."

Neville nodded. "I guess I understand. My gran and I have never had that much money, but it's always been enough. I'd probably be in your situation if I had six brothers and sisters."

"Tell you what, Harry," said Ron. "You can buy me a Firebolt if you really want to."

Harry thought Ron was joking, but he wanted to be sure. He stopped and stared at Ron intently. "Would you really let me? Because if you say yes, we'll go to Gringotts right now." With his eyes, he tried to make sure Ron knew he was serious.

Ron's eyes widened. "Of course, I was joking! Are you crazy? Do you know how much a Firebolt costs?"

"Six hundred and seventy Galleons," Harry answered, deadly serious. "You shouldn't joke about something you'd know I'd really like to do."

Ron sighed in exasperation. "Harry, I know you have a fair bit of gold, but you do that a few times, and your vault will be down to nothing."

"Ron, they pay me for teaching, remember? I have no expenses. I'm going to get three thousand, five hundred Galleons this year that I didn't expect. Do you really think I'm going to miss six hundred and seventy that much? I would give the whole thing to your family if I thought they would let me."

Ron looked flabbergasted, and Ginny and Neville looked surprised as well. "Three thousand five hundred for the year? That's really good," said Ginny.

"Actually, it's four thousand two hundred, Harry," corrected Hermione. "They pay you in the summer, too, even though you're not teaching then."

Ron was shaking his head. "Having money must give you an odd attitude about spending it."

Harry gave Ron his most earnest look. "No, Ron, you know what gives me an odd attitude? Not having money, and then having it. The Dursleys never gave me a pound, even though they had plenty of money. Then I had plenty of money, and I knew I didn't want to be like them, I wanted to do what I wished had been done for me. Remember the Hogwarts Express, first year? Do you know how happy it made me to be able to buy that stuff and share it with you? It really felt great.

"Look, I'm not saying I don't understand your attitude about this. I can see why you would feel that way. But I wouldn't feel like I was doing you a favor. I would feel like you were doing me a favor, letting me do something that would make me happy."

Ron finally looked serious. "Harry, I can see you're serious about this. It's kind of amazing, really. And I do take your point, I can imagine myself feeling the way you do if I was in your position. I'm almost tempted. But the fact is, I just got a new broom last year, and I can't imagine Mum being very happy when it was hard for them to buy me what they bought me, and then have it made irrelevant by a Firebolt. I'm sure you can understand that. Also, as a Keeper, a Firebolt would be pretty much wasted on me."

"It wouldn't only be for Quidditch, Ron," Harry said. "But yes, I do see the point about your mother. She was really happy to buy you that broom when you were made a prefect. I didn't think of that." Harry felt frustrated.

To Harry's surprise, Ron smiled a little. "That look on your face is kind of how I feel when I want to buy something but can't. You want to and can't, just for a different reason. And it was nice, what you said about your salary. Yes, they'd never take it, even though you'd want them to. They just wouldn't be comfortable."

Harry sighed again, and they continued walking. Then he turned to Ginny. "Ginny, any chance I can persuade you?"

"I've been thinking about it for the last few minutes," she said, to his surprise, "because I knew you would ask me. I'm tempted as well. I don't have any issues with Mum, since my broom's a hand-me-down, and as a Chaser, it wouldn't be wasted. But my problem is, it wouldn't mean to me what it would mean to Ron. I don't look at a Firebolt in Quality Quidditch Supplies with lust in my heart, like Ron does. It would be nice, but that would be about it. I promise you, Harry, that if it meant to me what it would mean to Ron, I would let you do it. But it just doesn't."

"Okay, I can see that," Harry said. "But let me ask the two of you a question. Bill works for Gringotts. Suppose he came into a lot of money, let's say, twenty thousand Galleons. If he wanted to give your parents five thousand so they could be more comfortable financially, would they take it?"

Ron and Ginny looked at each other, their faces indicating that neither was sure. Ginny said, "We don't know, Harry. But I see where you're going with this. If they would take it from Bill, they should take it from you."

Harry nodded. "What it really comes down to is, am I truly a member of the family or not? Would they consider my children their grandchildren, but refuse to accept from me what they would accept from one of you? I'd like to know that."

"I'd like to too, actually, Harry," said Ginny. "It seems only fair. I'll tell you what I'll do. The next time I get Mum alone, I'll ask her the Bill question, a nice, innocent what-if question. If she says no, or that they'd have to think about it, then she's off the hook. But if she says yes, I'll lower the boom on her. She'll be upset, but it's perfectly fair."

"Is that really fair, to find out that way?" asked Neville. "Seems kind of tricky."

"Where do you think Ginny got the idea to do that, Neville?" said Ron. "She's done it to us, more than once, to convince us of something or other. Who knows, if she's really on the ball, she could recognize Ginny's question for the trap that it is."

"No, she won't, Ron," said Ginny. "She won't be expecting it. I don't think she knows that Harry's so keen to give away large amounts of gold."

"Why are you so keen, Harry?" Neville wondered. "Why is it so important to you?"

Before Harry could answer, Hermione said, "I think I can answer that, and Harry can tell me if I'm wrong. You see, Neville, Harry has no real family, by which I mean, people who welcome him home and care about him. The Weasleys became that for him, and they're very good people. And it wasn't because he was Harry Potter, he knows that. Everybody-well, everybody except Percy-in the family has been very good to him, so he badly wants to do something for them, in gratitude. Gold seems like the perfect thing-Harry has more than he needs, and they don't have as much as they'd like. He'd like it to make them happy, so it's frustrating to him that it might make them as uncomfortable as it would happy. Does that about cover it, Harry?"

"I could hardly have said it better myself," he answered, as they exited Diagon Alley and headed into Muggle London. "Hermione, you know how to get to this store, right?"

She nodded. "It's just a few blocks away, I assume that's why you picked it. Just follow me, it won't take long."

Ginny picked up the thread of the conversation. "Harry, of course, it's extremely good of you to want to do that. But you know what, you made Mum very, very happy with that card. She's mentioned it two or three times to me since Christmas, and of course I was there when she opened it. She's also mentioned that you kiss her back now when she kisses you. I told her why, of course. But if you only do stuff like that, that's more than enough. Even though she'd know that you're sincere in your reasons for wanting to give it, she might be afraid it could somehow cause tensions later, and she wouldn't want to risk that. She's very happy with your affection."

"The other thing," Ron added, "is that in a way, it's almost not necessary anymore. Ginny and I are the only two left, whereas there used to be as many as seven of us kids. That's much less of a burden, and one way I noticed is that they gave us more pocket money than usual this year. So it's already not like it was, and when Ginny and I leave, they'll have far fewer expenses. They'll say it's not necessary."

Harry was disappointed, but he could understand that, too. "Okay, but I still want Ginny to ask the Bill question. I really would give them as much gold as they'd take. I mean, I'm not even going to need what's in my vault. Even if I don't manage to become an Auror—"

"Are you kidding, Harry?" interrupted Neville. "They can't wait to have you, didn't you notice?" To the others, Neville said, "The way they talked about him, it was obvious that to them, the testing is a formality. They act like he's one of them already."

"You're not being very understanding of my modesty problem, Neville," Harry joked. "I hate to jinx it. Anyway, I was saying, even if I don't become an Auror, I'm never going to have money problems, being Harry Potter. I'll always be able to do something."

"Yeah, that's true, Harry," agreed Ron. "You could charge for signing autographs!" Harry gave Ron a sour look.

"Actually, you could write a book," suggested Hermione. "Even your life up until now is interesting enough that it would be a best-seller."

"I never thought of that," said Harry. "But you see my point. Nobody is ever going to worry whether I have enough gold, even if I give a lot of it away."

"Sorry, Harry," said Ginny. "Who knows, we could be wrong about what Mum and Dad will think. But it doesn't seem likely. Even so, and I'm completely serious when I say this... just randomly give Mum a hug and a kiss for no reason, and ask her some questions about anything. Sit down with Dad and talk to him about Muggle stuff, or his job. You'll make them happier than you would by giving them gold."

Harry didn't respond, because he knew it was true. He resolved to remember to do what she suggested a few times before going back to Hogwarts.

They entered the store and started looking around. Hermione and Ginny quickly became interested in clothes and shoes, which the boys had no interest at all in, so they decided to separate and meet in an hour. The boys walked and talked, taking long looks at nothing in particular. In the sporting goods department, Harry explained various Muggle sports to Ron and Neville. When the girls rejoined them, Ginny carrying a large and full bag, they went to the electronics department and looked around.

"Dad would go nuts in this kind of place," said Ron. "He'd spend all kinds of money, and then Mum would be annoyed at him because of the clutter."

"Hey, Ron, look at this," said Harry. He pointed to a small chessboard.

"Why is that in the electronics section?" asked Ron.

"It's a chess-playing computer," Harry replied. "See, it has sensors on each square, they can tell when you've moved and what you did. Or you can input the moves manually on the keypad. Do you know what the notation is... oh, wait a minute, it's on the board. Okay, I'll type in, d2d4. See, instantly, it answers g8f6. I've seen you do that more than once, I never know what to do after that."

"Usually, you should play c2c4," Ron said. "Then I imagine the computer, if it's smart, will play g7g6." Harry entered in White's move, and the computer responded as Ron had predicted. "Okay, now g1f3," Ron said, speaking to himself more than to Harry, who was amused to see Ron getting so interested. Hermione and the others had walked over. "Could this thing actually beat me?" Ron asked.

Hermione chuckled. "Ron, Muggle computers can beat the best chess players in the world. This won't be one of those computers, but I'm pretty sure it can beat you."

A salesman had walked by and heard their conversation. "Do you play tournament chess, sir?" he asked Ron. "Do you have a rating?"

Ron shook his head. "No, but I'm pretty good. No one at my school can beat me."

"Well, this computer's tournament-regulation setting has an equivalent FIDE rating of twenty-two hundred, which is a strong master level. A master will typically have spent at least several hundred hours studying, and played two to three hundred tournament games," the salesman explained.

"And this thing plays as well as someone who's done that?" Ron asked, impressed. The salesman nodded. "And can it use batteries? The same type as a compact disc player?" Receiving affirmative answers, Ron made his decision. "Okay... oh, wait a minute, how much is it?"

Hermione gestured to the price tag. "Ninety-nine pounds," she read.

"Perfect! Good, I'll take it," Ron said. He started to pick up the board.

"Not this one, Ron," murmured Hermione, embarrassed at Ron's faux pas. "This is the display model, they have other ones down below. Here, give me your certificate and let me finish the purchase. You go on with this game, let's see how you do."

Ron continued playing the game he had started. The salesman took a new computer from below the counter, and Hermione gestured for Harry to walk with her to the register. She whispered in case her voice carried. "I realized that Ron doesn't know about VAT," she said. "I was afraid that if he found out-

"He wouldn't get it, because he'd need more money and wouldn't want to ask," Harry finished for her. "Good idea. Should I-

"No, let me do it, it won't be that much. I like the idea that I helped him buy it too, even if he won't know." Hermione paid for it, using the certificate and her own money to pay for the tax. The box was put into a bag, which Hermione took over to Ron.

"Look at this, I'm winning," said Ron. He was two pawns ahead of the computer, and had a dominant position. "I thought I wasn't supposed to be able to win."

"This is the weakest setting, Ron," Hermione explained. "The display model would naturally be at the weakest setting, so customers wouldn't be intimidated by losing so badly. Of course, even at the weak setting, it's still going to beat a lot of people who don't know much about chess."

"I see, that makes sense," said Ron, accepting the bag that Hermione handed over. Harry noticed that she didn't give him the receipt. She also handed him a one-pound note, as she knew that would be the change if there had been no tax. "Well, I don't need to finish, I know I'd win. Let's go look around some more. Ginny, did you spend your whole certificate?"

She nodded. "All here in this bag. Shoes, pants, blouses, and other things you wouldn't care about."

"I believe that," Ron agreed. They walked away from the electronics department. "Should we go, or does anybody want to look around some more?" They realized there were several areas of potential interest they hadn't been to, and decided to stay.

As they walked, they talked, but Harry suddenly had a strange feeling, as though something was wrong, but he couldn't identify it. It became stronger, and he suddenly realized what it was: it was very similar to what he'd felt when the Cruciatus Curse had been tested on him, just before the spell had been delivered.

He felt a burst of adrenaline, and his reflexes kicked in. "Get down!" he yelled, grabbing the two nearest people, Hermione and Neville, pushing them to the ground

as he went down. Just as he said the words, he heard two voices saying, "Avada Kedavra!" The green bolts, aimed at Harry, just missed him and the others, going over their heads. Ron and Ginny were slower getting down, but weren't in the line of fire.

Lying on his side, Harry whipped out his wand, and Apparated to a spot behind the two who had fired the curses. He immediately put down an anti-Disapparation field, followed by two Stunning spells. The spells had no effect; they had not seen Harry, but they must have had the Protection Charm up just in case, Harry thought. He now saw Neville, on the other side of the attackers and using a counter as a shield, wield his wand, and ropes formed and whirled around the two. One immediately broke out of the ropes, and used his wand to free the other.

While they were doing so, Harry looked around for things to throw, and found four solid-looking metal objects. He waved his wand, and all four flew at high speed toward the two attackers. Harry had hoped they would not be expecting such a crude attack, and he was right; two objects hit each attacker's head, and they went down in a heap. Neville quickly Summoned their wands and wrapped them in ropes again.

Getting to his feet and looking around, Harry saw Tonks and Winston Clark run up to him. "Are there any others?" he asked.

"One," said Tonks. "Ron and Hermione were firing at him, but he Disapparated, he's gone. If there are any others, we don't know about them." Harry saw other Aurors Apparate, casting spells over wide areas that calmed down the frightened shoppers.

"Okay, it's secure, we just have to put it right, start doing Memory Charms," said Clark. "We want to get you all to safety. We'll assist the others. Harry, Apparate to Arthur Weasley's office; you know where it is, and it's close to ours. Go with him to the Auror offices, the others'll be there very soon."

"But the others are fine, right?" Harry asked.

"Yes, they're fine," yelled Tonks impatiently. "Now go!"

Instantly, Harry was standing next to Arthur Weasley's desk at the Ministry of Magic. Arthur, sitting at his desk, immediately stood. "Harry! I heard the alarms, but I didn't know what it was. It was you?"

"Yes," Harry said, still not having had much time to think. "We were attacked in a Muggle department store. Aurors are there, they say everyone's fine. Clark said you and I should go to the Aurors' offices. That's where they're taking the others."

Arthur broke into a run, and Harry followed. In a very short time, they were in a large room. An Auror Apparated in, holding Ron by both shoulders; the others were already there. Hermione was hugging Neville.

"Everyone's fine, Arthur," said Clark. "You might want to go to the scene, they'll need lots of people doing Memory Charms. It was pretty crowded."

"Okay, but I'm going to stop at home first, tell Molly to come in. She'll want to be here." He Disapparated. Kingsley Shacklebolt Apparated in and approached Harry. "I'd like you five to join me in that interview room," he said, indicating a nearby empty room. "Dumbledore'll be here in a- oh, there he is." Dumbledore had just Apparated into the room. Harry and the others walked in, and were greeted by Dumbledore.

"Harry, I am very glad you and the others are all right," said Dumbledore gravely.

Harry nodded. "It just now happened, I've barely had a chance to think."

"We need to get a memory from someone," said Kingsley. "Who should it be?"

"Harry has used the Pensieve before," said Dumbledore. "If you would, Harry."

Using his wand, Harry extracted the memory. "You need not join us," said Dumbledore. "You should relax. We will be back in a moment." Dumbledore and Kingsley entered the Pensieve.

Harry looked at the others. "You're about to apologize, aren't you," said Hermione. "I've seen that look, I can tell. You know we accept the risk."

He shook his head. "Yes, just being in public with me puts you at risk," he said disgustedly. "And people wonder why I don't want a girlfriend..."

The others looked at him with sympathy. "Really, Harry, it's all right," said Neville. "I know you don't like it, but we want to be around when something like that happens." The others said nothing, but their agreement with Neville's statement was clear on their faces. Harry looked down, frustrated. All he could think of was how close his friends had come to being killed, again. He imagined what he would be feeling if one of them had.

Molly Weasley ran into the room, and one by one hugged everyone, including a surprised Neville, Harry last. "Oh, thank goodness you're all all right," she said fervently.

"Molly, I should leave the Burrow and go back to Hogwarts," said Harry, despondent. "I'm too dangerous, I-"

"Oh, stop that," said Molly impatiently. "Of course you're staying. You don't think Dumbledore's helped arrange security at the Burrow? Why do you think they waited to attack you until you were in public?"

"That reminds me, I thought I was always being followed," said Harry. "What happened with that?"

Dumbledore and Kingsley had just returned from the Pensieve; Kingsley immediately Disapparated. "You were, Harry," said Dumbledore. "It was the one

following you who alerted the Aurors. Everything happened so quickly that there was almost nothing for the Aurors to do once they arrived. You and Neville had taken care of the two that are now in custody, and the other had already escaped. The time from when they shot Killing Curses at you to when you incapacitated them was six seconds.

"Molly, if you or anyone else would like to view Harry's memory of the attack, you may do so now, before Harry puts the memories back." She wanted to, and so did all the others. Harry decided to join them. They watched it twice, after which Harry felt he more or less understood all that had happened. They exited the Pensieve, and Harry put his memories back.

Neville spoke first. "The Aurors told us that usually before a Death Eater will do a Killing Curse, they'll put up an anti-Disapparation field so the person can't get away. Why didn't they do that before attacking Harry?"

"They did, Neville," said Dumbledore. "Harry simply defeated it. Then as soon as he Apparated, he put a field on them. Just before you distracted them with the ropes, I saw both try to Disapparate, and fail."

"So... that means Harry's a stronger wizard than either of them?" Dumbledore nodded. The others looked impressed, but Harry was still in no mood to be impressed with himself. As he had in the infirmary after Hogsmeade, Harry stood up and kicked the wall. It made him feel no better this time than it had then.

"Harry," said Dumbledore in the same calm that had made Harry angrier after Sirius's death, "I know that you are angry because your friends were put at risk. But they were exactly where they chose to be, where they would wish to be."

In his anger, Harry did what he had told himself he would not do. Raising his voice, he asked, "And that's why you taught them the Diffusion, too, right? Because they would want you to? Are the Aurors right, that you taught it just so it could be used to save me?"

Still calm, Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, Harry. That was why. I make no apologies for it. You must be kept safe, and for reasons greater than my own personal wishes. You know this, and so do your friends. They wish to--"

"I don't care what they wish! I want them to stay alive!" Harry yelled. Realizing that he was on the verge of acting as he had in Dumbledore's office in June, Harry stopped talking, still furious.

Ron got up and walked over to him. "Harry, get a grip, will you? Do you really want to be yelling at him? You have to get over this! Do you think we're stupid, that we can't decide what we want? We've always done this! Why should now be any different?"

"SIRIUS IS DEAD!" Harry screamed, losing control momentarily. Then he got it back, and saw Ron's shocked expression. He felt like he desperately needed Ron to understand this. "He's dead, he's never coming back, and I'm terrified that it could be any of you next..." He started sobbing, unable to say any more. So absorbed in his misery was Harry that he didn't think to be surprised when Ron stepped forward and lightly held Harry, Harry's head on Ron's shoulder. Harry cried for about a half a minute, after which Ron guided him back into his chair.

Harry breathed deeply and looked up at Ron. "It was only Pansy because she's the one in the most danger," he said, struggling to keep control. "It could have been any of you."

"We know, Harry," said Ron. "We know. But we can't do anything else, you know that. Put yourself in our position. You'd do exactly what we're doing. We're risking ourselves for you, and you're risking yourself for all of wizarding society. Don't blame us for following your example. How would you feel if we tried to get you to knuckle under to Voldemort, to keep you from danger? And do you think we don't worry about you?"

Ron paused, then continued. "I'm sorry, Harry, I forgot about Sirius when I asked what was different. That was stupid, and I can see how it would affect how you see this. But you know I'm right."

Harry slowly gained some control over his feelings. "Yes, I know you are. That's the worst thing about this. I just can't help how I feel. It's kind of like Hogsmeade." He paused. "The great Harry Potter," he said bitterly. "Stronger than these two Death Eaters, strong enough to drive Voldemort off... but not strong enough not to have a fit because his friends are in danger. It should say that on my card."

There was another silence. Then Dumbledore said, "If it did, Harry, it would be nothing to be ashamed of. This is your burden. We have seen how much you love, so it is not surprising that you would react this way. Your friends will support you in this way, as they will when you are under attack. You will get through it with their help."

He looked up at them, and it was easy to see that they agreed with Dumbledore. Ginny stood, walked over, and pulled at Harry to get him to stand up. He couldn't help but smile, a very small one, at what she was doing. He allowed himself to be pulled up, and she hugged him. He held her, and tried to not think about his fears. Dumbledore's right, he thought. I'll get through this with their help. I just pray they'll all be there at the end.

Finally, he let go of Ginny. He looked at her, Ron, Hermione, and Neville. "Thank you," he said.

Ginny pulled her chair over next to Harry's, sat down, and held his hand. She looked at him as if daring him to comment. He gave her a look that he hoped conveyed his appreciation.

"Harry," asked Hermione, "I saw from your memory that you pulled us down and yelled at exactly the same time the Death Eaters said the incantations. But you didn't see them. How did you know?"

"I was wondering about that myself," added Molly.

Harry shook his head. "I can't even say for sure, but whatever it is, it's the same thing that let me block those Cruciatus Curses blindfolded. It's just a feeling, something that seems wrong. I didn't even know for sure what it was, but it was enough like it felt with the Cruciatus Curse to know it was serious. I just reacted, didn't think."

"Is this common?" Molly asked Dumbledore. "I've never heard of it."

"It is rare," replied Dumbledore. "It is something I experience to a certain degree. Voldemort has been reputed to as well, more strongly. One reason he is so strong is that it seems that he can know what spell is coming before it does, and so more easily prepare and defend. My guess is that this ability, along with being a Parselmouth and perhaps more, was passed along to Harry by the curse."

"But then, why am I only noticing it now?" Harry asked. "If I've had it all along?"

"It is a very subtle ability, easy to miss," explained Dumbledore. "You noticed it because you were subjected to the Cruciatus Curse for five nights in a row, and you were in a more focused state. In general, the stronger a spell it is, the more easily you will notice it. The trial with Voldemort caused you to become aware of it, and this caused you to notice it more consciously in the demonstration with Professor Snape. That is why, the next day, you knew you would be able to block the Curse blindfolded, but were unable to satisfactorily explain why. In this case, the feeling was even stronger, I suspect, because the curse involved was a Killing Curse. This ability saved not only your life, but Neville's as well. One of the curses was poorly aimed, and would have just missed you and hit Neville. I hesitate to tell you this, for obvious reasons, but it is the truth."

"Harry," said Neville earnestly, "whatever you do, don't-"

Harry nodded. "It's okay, Neville, I'm done with my fit."

"It wasn't a fit, Harry," said Hermione sternly. "It was a very understandable emotional reaction."

Harry smiled a little, still looking at Neville. "I'm done with my very understandable emotional reaction, Neville, so don't worry."

Neville nodded his acknowledgment. "And thank you for pulling us down."

"Yes, thank you, Harry," Hermione agreed.

"There is something else related to this topic I do not want to neglect to mention, Harry," said Dumbledore. "You reacted in time to save yourself and Neville from the curses, but you noticed something a short time prior to that, did you not?"

"Yes, I just felt like something was wrong, but I didn't know what it was. It was very vague. It was... maybe four or five seconds before the curses."

"That was my impression as well," Dumbledore agreed. "I saw your face. One moment it was normal, then suddenly it was very unsettled. What you were noticing was the anti-Disapparation field they had put up. You started looking unsettled a few seconds before it was deployed; you simply did not know why. I wanted to inform you of that so you might recognize it in the future."

He nodded and sighed. "I have a feeling I'm going to have plenty of opportunity."

"Unfortunately so," said Dumbledore. "In any case, we should work on refining this skill after vacation. It is clearly a very valuable one. And speaking of skills, yours seem to be improving by leaps and bounds. Kingsley just said, 'if he gets much better, there's not going to be much we can do for him that he can't do for himself.' The fact that there was little for the Aurors to do once they got there was a good indication of that.."

"It would have been very different if they hadn't gotten permission for me to Apparate."

"Yes, and if you had not become so quickly adept at what they taught you. Not everybody can move four objects simultaneously, so quickly, as you did. I know your time is very limited as it is, but I think you may wish to consider having regular Saturday training sessions with the Aurors. What you accomplished in three days with them was obvious in what you did today. Even now, you are clearly not an easy mark for Death Eaters. With further training once a week, it will not be long before you are a match for any of them, and not a pushover for Voldemort."

"Then that's what I'll do," Harry said, determined. "Will they do that?"

Dumbledore allowed himself a small smile. "I have been consulting with them over the past few days. Even before today's events, they were proposing such an idea. They were most impressed with your progress over the three days, and so are happy to spend their own time on this. The fact that you may be critical to our cause also motivates them, but they would not spend the time if they felt it would be wasted. They also wished me, if I suggested it to you, to extend the invitation to Neville. They were quite impressed with him as well."

Harry looked at Neville, whose face had lit up. "How about it, Neville?"

"Obviously, I want to," said Neville fervently. "But what about the others?"

Harry wondered if Neville was thinking particularly of Ron, or Hermione, or all three. Clearly wanting to make up for his behavior on the night Harry returned from the Aurors, Ron spoke. "Neville, you're both special cases. You're really good at dueling, and the son of two Aurors, which is important to them... and Harry is, well, Harry. They can't be taking everyone's friends. Don't worry about it."

Hermione touched Neville's arm. "It's okay, Neville. You and Harry can teach us what you learn."

Harry wondered where he would get the time, and Neville looked amazed at the notion of teaching anyone anything, but neither argued. "Thank you," said Neville, to Hermione and Ron.

"I will make arrangements with them, then," said Dumbledore. He stood up. "I should be getting along. I will let you know when arrangements are finalized with the Aurors. Tomorrow being Saturday, it is possible they may be interested in a session then. If so, I will let you know soon."

"Sir," Harry said quickly, before Dumbledore could leave. "I want to apologize for what I said about the Diffusion Shield. I meant to ask you about it, but I didn't mean to accuse you about it."

"Thank you, Harry, though I did not take offense," said Dumbledore. Harry wondered what it would take for Dumbledore to take offense. "It was a valid question, and understandable under the circumstances. I know that you are referring to your tone, and again, that is understandable." He walked to the door, stopping to pat Harry on the shoulder. "Molly, I will be in touch," he said, and left.

"Okay, let's get back to the Burrow, no point in lingering here," said Molly, getting up. Ron and Ginny picked up their bags from the shopping expedition. "There's a fireplace a short walk away. Hermione, Neville, are you coming back with us, or going to your homes?"

"We'll come back, at least for a bit," said Hermione, as Neville nodded. They followed Molly out of the room.

Fifteen minutes later, Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville were sitting in the Weasleys' living room, eating cookies and drinking butterbeer provided by Molly. "I guess when you almost get killed, you get to eat bad stuff before dinner," commented Ginny. Fawkes had joined Harry.

Ron was already playing the chess computer, after getting some help getting started. "There's a manual, you know, Ron," Hermione had said, but only halfheartedly, knowing he would not read it unless he absolutely had to.

"Well, that was quite an eventful first day as a couple for you two," Harry said to Hermione and Neville. They were on the sofa, and Hermione had her arm around Neville, who looked happy but embarrassed, as if he were doing something wrong.

"It was certainly memorable," agreed Hermione. "Nothing like mortal peril to make you feel closer. Funny, it makes me more glad that I was brave enough to do this. What happened today makes me feel like you have to live life while you can. Or as a famous Muggle said, 'eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.'"

"I'm sure he was invited to a lot of parties, with that attitude," said Ron, not looking up from the chessboard.

"You know what it means, Ron, or at least you would if your head wasn't buried in that thing," chastised Hermione.

"I know what it means," replied Ron, still not looking up. Harry suspected that now it was deliberate. "I know it doesn't mean literally tomorrow. I'm just saying, it's kind of morbid."

"I see your point, Ron," said Harry, "but for some reason, it especially makes sense to me right now. It just seems kind of hard to be merry right now."

Ginny smiled. "We could get Tonks in here, Harry, I'm sure she'd have a few ideas."

"I bet she would," Harry agreed. "Say, Neville, are you going to be reporting to Hermione every time Tonks has fun with me on Saturdays?"

Neville looked at Hermione, then back to Harry. With a straight face, Neville said, "I think Hermione's going to be mad at me if I don't. You wouldn't want to be responsible for that, would you?"

Harry chuckled. "Of course not, Neville. I have a feeling that soon, I'll be looking back fondly on the days when you were too afraid to make fun of me."

Now Neville smiled. "No you won't, Harry. I think you like me better this way."

Harry nodded. "You're right, I do. And Ron... thank you, for earlier."

Now Ron did look up from the chessboard. "No problem, mate. In that kind of situation, you're allowed to go off your nut a bit."

"That wasn't exactly what I meant."

"I know what you meant," Ron said. "What can I say... I felt awful for you, which you probably noticed. Dumbledore says it's a huge burden, which especially after today, I can see a bit better. I'm almost amazed you don't have a fit like that once a week or so. I mean, I worry about you sometimes, about all of you, wondering, what if something happened. But at least I don't have to feel responsible for anyone but myself. You're not really responsible for us, of course, but I do see why you could feel that way. But just try and stop us, you'll find out how non-responsible you are."

"He's right, Harry," said Hermione. "We all love you, and you're stuck with that."

"You got that from a greeting card, didn't you, Hermione," said Ron, deadpan.

Harry, Neville, and Ginny chuckled. Hermione looked at Ron disapprovingly. "You can be sincere and nice with Harry, but all I get is smart remarks?"

"Tell you what, Hermione... you go through what Harry goes through, and I'll be as sincere and heartfelt as you want."

Hermione looked disappointed. "That's fair enough, I guess. But it would be nice if you could do it sometimes, just for no reason. You're going to have to learn, if you want a halfway decent woman in the future."

"Learn what, dear?" asked Molly, just having entered the room to put some things away.

"Ron, to be sincere and heartfelt, at least sometimes," explained Hermione.

"Oh, he can, Hermione," said Molly. "Not only today, I've seen him do it. I know he'll manage when the time comes."

"Thank you, Mum," said Ron. "I think."

Harry suddenly remembered what Ginny had said earlier. He got up, walked over to Molly, and hugged and kissed her. Delighted, she looked at him. "Harry! What brought this on?"

"No reason," Harry said, happy at her reaction. "It's just that I haven't done that as much as I should, for a few years. I just wasn't in the habit. So I want to make up for it now."

Molly beamed at him. "Aren't you sweet," she said fondly. "I know you don't want a girlfriend now, dear, but someday, some girl will be very, very lucky to get you." Still smiling, she left the room.

Harry turned to Ginny. "As long as I keep getting good advice, anyway."

She gave him a serious look. "Here's some more good advice, Harry: Keep focusing on love, especially in crisis situations, but as much as you can. That's how you'll stay alive, and help us stay alive."

He nodded. Anything I can do to keep the rest of you alive, I will, he thought. He found himself looking forward to more Auror training sessions. He pet Fawkes, and hoped there would be one tomorrow.

Harry found out the next day that the Aurors didn't plan to have the next session for a few days, so he would have plenty of time to hang around the Burrow and do whatever he wanted in the meantime. It occurred to him that the only times he had ever had that kind of freedom outside the oppressive environment of the Dursleys' home had been in the summers before his second and fourth years at

Hogwarts, when he had stayed at the Burrow at the end of summer. The thought made him think of the Burrow even more as his home than he already did.

He spent an hour the next morning talking to Molly, who left at ten-thirty to go shopping. She asked Ginny if she wanted to come along; Ginny declined, and Harry noticed that Molly didn't ask him, though she glanced at him in a way that suggested that she wanted to, but had thought better of it. He knew the reason was the security issue, which brought his mood down. Not that he would have especially wanted to go anyway—he wouldn't have, he knew—but it was just the idea that he couldn't go anywhere in public without putting everyone around him at risk. Molly left through the fireplace, saying she'd be back in a few hours.

Harry and Ginny were downstairs; Ron was upstairs in his room, absorbed in playing his chess computer. Harry walked to the living room window and looked outside. It was raining steadily, and had been since he'd woken up. His mood was further dampened, as he'd felt like going for a fly all morning, and especially right then. He walked to the sofa and sat, and a few seconds after he did, Fawkes materialized and fluttered down, standing on his lap. He couldn't help but smile a little as he felt Fawkes's calming influence affect him, though he was still unhappy.

"Does he usually do that when you're depressed?" asked Ginny, from the other end of the sofa.

"Not always, but yes, a lot of the time," agreed Harry, as he gently pet Fawkes's feathers. "How did you know I was depressed, anyway?"

She chuckled; he got the feeling that it was because she thought he was being dense. "It's all over your face. I'm not Hugo, but I can read moods fairly well. I'd be able to tell even if it was a lot less obvious than this. You're thinking about yesterday, aren't you." Despite the words, her tone made it a statement, not a question.

He sighed. "Shouldn't I be?"

She nodded sympathetically. "It's not a question of should or shouldn't. It's really understandable that you would." She paused for a few seconds, then continued, "Last night, before I went to sleep, I was thinking about what it would be like to be you, to be in your position. Anytime you go someplace that isn't totally secure, you have to worry about your friends being killed, or innocent people being killed. I was trying to imagine what that would feel like."

He didn't particularly feel like talking about it, but he appreciated her effort to see things from his point of view. "Bet it wasn't fun."

"No," she agreed. "It kept me up for another hour past when I usually fall asleep." Looking at his expression, she added, "You know, I don't mean to depress you

more by talking about it. I just want you to know that I understand what you're going through. Or, I'm trying to, anyway."

"Thanks, I appreciate it," he said. "I must be pretty bad off, if both you and Fawkes can't get me out of feeling depressed."

"Well, we should do something that'll distract you, then," she suggested. "I saw you looking out the window. I'd love a fly also, too bad about the weather. I know, why don't you teach me dueling, get me started on what Dumbledore and the Aurors have taught you."

"But you couldn't practice what I taught you, because of the underage thing," he pointed out.

She shrugged. "It's no problem, Mum's not here."

He did a double-take. "It's against the law!"

She chuckled knowingly. "Well, yes and no." Seeing his blank expression, she explained. "A lot of families don't pay attention to the underage magic law, and from talking to people at Hogwarts, I've found out that it's pretty well understood that the Ministry knows that, that they only take it seriously in certain situations, like when Muggles are likely to be involved."

"I mean, look at what happened with you, the first time Dobby visited you. You got a warning for the Hover Charm that he did. What that means is that the Ministry magic detectors knew that magic was done, but they didn't know who did it. They assumed it was you, since it happened in a home where you were the only wizard. So, think about it. If they can't tell who did the magic, how could they possibly use the magic detection to enforce the underage law, in a home with a whole family of wizards? They can't, and they don't try. We don't do underage magic around here mainly because Mum and Dad don't want us to, but really it's more because it's their rule than because it's against the law. They haven't said that, but I've figured it out."

"If they can't enforce it most of the time, then why have the law at all?" wondered Harry.

"One reason, I think, is so parents can threaten their kids with it, tell them it's against the law and they could get caught," said Ginny. "That doesn't work for very long, though, since most kids start doing magic when they're alone, and nobody from the Ministry comes charging in. Another reason is the Muggle angle; they don't want Muggle-born wizards doing magic in their Muggle homes, mainly because of the possibility that it could be noticed by someone outside the family, and then they have to come in and do Memory Charms. The law is really a little unfair to the Muggle-borns, since it mostly only applies to them. The only other reason I can think of is to

stop kids from doing magic in public, where they could annoy people, or do accidental damage.

"Anyway, Harry... believe me, lots of magic has been done in this house that Mum and Dad didn't know about, and the only way they ever found out was if the results were really obvious, like things getting broken. Who knows, Mum might not even object if you asked her, since the more Ron and I can defend ourselves right now, the better. I just don't see the point in bothering. She'd be reluctant to break the law, even an unenforceable one."

Harry slowly nodded. "I guess that makes sense, I hadn't thought of it that way before. It's kind of annoying, considering all the trouble I got in last year, just for using it to defend myself. Bad enough that they use a law against me unfairly, but especially one that a lot of people break anyway." He thought for a few seconds.

"Okay, sure, I'll teach you. I just hope your mother doesn't come home and see us."

"You could explain it to her anyway, but she won't," Ginny assured him. He spent the next hour teaching her the basics he'd learned from Dumbledore, and started her on what the Aurors had taught him. They stopped at noon to have sandwiches for lunch. Ginny suggested they make an extra one for Ron, and she took it upstairs. "He thanked me, but he barely looked up," Ginny reported with amusement upon returning to the kitchen.

They chatted as they ate the sandwiches and potato chips, and Harry found that he was feeling better than he had. After they finished eating, they walked over to the living room window and looked out. Rain was still falling, as heavily as ever. They exchanged a look of disappointment, then Ginny's face lit up. "I just thought of something. It might not be raining at Hogwarts, it's pretty far away. We could fly over the pitch there, Fawkes could take us!"

Harry hesitated. "I guess he could... I'd love to, but I'm not sure I want to ask him, for something like-" He stopped speaking, then smiled. "It's funny... I'm getting a feeling, like he wouldn't mind. Normally, I wouldn't know if that was my idea or his; a lot of times it's hard to tell. But I'm also getting an image, of the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch. I'm pretty sure he's telling me that it's cloudy, but not raining there, and that he doesn't mind taking us there at all. So, yes, I'd love to. We should ask Ron if he wants to come."

"I'll ask him, I'll go up to get my broom," said Ginny, as Harry Summoned his. She came back a minute later and said, "He says, maybe later. He's really involved with that thing." Harry nodded, happy that the gift certificate had led to Ron finding something he enjoyed so much, which he never would have found otherwise. Fawkes appeared, and Harry put an arm around Ginny and grabbed Fawkes's tail.

They flew for a half hour, then Ginny wanted to do some Chaser practice, so they got a Quaffle from the Quidditch supply shed. Harry acted as a Keeper, and Ginny would fly at him and try to shoot past him. After a half hour of that, they decided to rest, and flew over to the stands and sat on a bench.

"You were getting pretty good there, at the end," she said. "You wouldn't be a bad Keeper."

"Thanks," he replied. "Never tried it before, it takes a little bit to get used to."

"Well, you have great reflexes, that's bound to help," she observed. "We should do this with Ron; he could Keep, and you could defend. It'd be good practice for me, a real challenge."

"I'd be happy to," he said. "But I'm not a Chaser either, of course, so I wouldn't be able to--"

"You'll do fine, trust me," she assured him. "Especially on the Firebolt, I'll have to work hard to get past you."

Harry nodded, and looked up at the sky, then over at the castle. As he had at the Burrow, he felt at home, as though he was somewhere he belonged. "You look like you feel kind of better than you did before," she said.

He nodded again. "I guess you were right about needing to be distracted. Thanks."

Smiling, she moved closer to him and put an arm around his waist; he reflexively put his arm around her shoulder in response. "I'm happy to do it," she said.

They sat in silence, and he looked around more. He saw Hagrid's hut, and wondered if Hagrid was there, or in the forest talking to Grawp. That made him think of the centaurs, then of Firenze, about whom he'd heard nothing since the year had started. He wondered what Firenze was doing, since he hadn't been teaching Divination; probably something secret for Dumbledore, Harry guessed. Or maybe Dumbledore helped him find a new herd of centaurs to join, since he'd been ostracized from the one in the Forbidden Forest.

Ginny shifted her position a little, and Harry suddenly thought of Hermione and Neville yesterday after the attack, on the sofa together, her arm around him. He was happy for them, but envied them a little. It would really be nice to have a girlfriend, he thought, especially someone like Ginny who's funny, really nice, and likes to fly and play Quidditch...

He imagined himself and Ginny walking through Diagon Alley, holding hands, going to Florean Fortescue's for ice cream and cake, as he knew many couples did. Hermione and Neville might be right now, he thought. In his mind's eye, he and Ginny

were at a table, laughing as she reached over to wipe off frosting from his lower lip. She leaned over and kissed him... and as they broke apart, they saw a Death Eater pointing a wand at Harry, a green bolt flying toward him. He saw Ginny leap in front of him to take the bolt meant for him; he looked on in horror as she fell to the ground.

Yanked back to reality, he stiffened, with a slight shudder. Ginny looked at him quizzically. He let go of her and quickly stood, the feeling that he was endangering her right then just by holding her taking him over. This is why you don't let yourself think about having a girlfriend, you idiot, he told himself. Not only could that happen, it'd be pretty likely to happen. I can't let myself think like that, I can't put anyone in that kind of danger. As he thought it, he realized that she would probably jump in front of a Killing Curse for him anyway, girlfriend or not, but it represented what he feared most. He knew he couldn't allow it.

She stood as well, looking at him with great concern. "What?" she asked.

He could hardly tell her what had just gone through his mind. "Nothing," he said, sounding unconvincing even to himself.

"Uh-huh," she said, sounding like she knew that he knew she didn't believe it. "It's yesterday again, isn't it?" This time, it was a question.

Trying to calm down, Harry nodded. Technically a lie, he thought, but close enough to the truth. She stepped forward and hugged him. "I'm sorry, Harry," she said.

He resisted the urge to push her away for her own safety, as he knew it was irrational. Even so, he found himself saying, "I just don't feel like you're safe with me."

She hugged him more tightly. "We're safe here, at Hogwarts."

"I mean--"

"I know, not only right now," she said, running a hand across his back. "You'll be well protected, Harry, and the better you're protected, the safer we are. You'll get through this, we all will. You have to believe that."

He nodded. "I guess I have to, since I'm stuck with the situation anyway." He moved his head off her shoulder to look at her, and was heartened by the love and support he saw in her eyes. "Thanks. I'm just being stupid, thinking things I shouldn't think."

"It's really understandable," she said.

Yes, it is, he thought wryly, most sixteen-year-olds would daydream about having a girlfriend. I just don't get to. "I suppose so," he conceded. "Want to fly some more?"

"Sure," she agreed. They mounted their brooms and kicked off again, flying high into the air. He couldn't totally escape being Harry Potter and all that came with it, he thought, but when he was flying with a friend, it seemed very far away.

Chapter 18

The Repulsion Charm

The Aurors had Harry and Neville for three training sessions during the rest of vacation, pleasing both greatly. Ron continued to be supportive, so Harry hoped that his emotional reaction that Monday night had been a one-time thing. Lupin came for dinner just after the New Year, and Harry discovered that Lupin had very mixed feelings about the notion of changing the limits of freedom to meet the current threat. As a werewolf, he had strong reason to fear it, but as a member of the Order of the Phoenix, he knew it could save many lives. He didn't come down on any one side, but Harry felt he was closer to himself and Molly than to Arthur and Hermione.

Hermione and Neville visited the Burrow frequently during the last week of vacation, giving them a chance to spend time together in a relaxed setting. Harry noticed that Neville was slowly starting to be more comfortable with the idea of Hermione as his girlfriend, sometimes being the one to hold her hand or sit closer to her. Molly thought it was wonderful, and to the great amusement of the others, was inspired to ask Ron if there were any girls at Hogwarts he was interested in.

Harry did not venture out in public again during vacation. Ron and Ginny thought that a short trip to Diagon Alley would be safe, but Harry just wasn't in the mood, even if not for security considerations. After the incident at the department store, Harry's security had been upgraded, and now rather than one Order member, there would be two Aurors shadowing him every time he appeared in public; his protection was now official. Just like the bloody Prime Minister, he thought, remembering Vernon's words. Still, Harry welcomed it to the extent that it would keep his friends safer if they were with him. He apologized to the Aurors for the inconvenience, but they all said they didn't mind. "Part of our job, Harry," Jack Temble had said. "One day, you yourself may be protecting people who really can defend themselves well enough not to need protection." Several other Aurors teased him about this as well, having heard what he had accomplished in the department store. Harry was very happy to be teased, as he knew it signaled respect and acceptance.

Sunday night finally came, and while Harry wasn't dreading going back to Hogwarts, he was less eager than he had been before, mainly because he enjoyed life

so much at the Burrow. Ron and Ginny were always around, he felt closer to Arthur and Molly than ever before, and Neville and Hermione were just a fireplace away. He knew that despite the department store attack it had been a very good two weeks, and that he would probably be nostalgic for it in the future.

Not too long before he and the others were to leave, Molly asked him if she could have a word with him in the kitchen. He followed her in, to find Arthur already sitting at the table. They sat down; Harry wondered if he was going to get some last-minute advice about being careful.

Instead, Molly surprised him by saying, "Harry, Ginny had a talk with us about the conversation you all had the day you went to the department store. The one about gold."

Harry had almost forgotten about that. He nodded for her to continue.

"First of all, Harry, it's so wonderful of you to want to do that. Ginny told us everything you said, and we can understand why you feel that way. We know how strongly you feel about it, and we take it seriously if only for that reason."

"Did she ask you the Bill question?" Harry asked.

She nodded wryly. "The little sneak," she said with amusement. "I taught her too well. My answer was 'maybe.' I said that we would probably take it, but only if there was something we particularly needed it for, or knew we would use it for. We wouldn't just take it for no other reason than to have it. We would know that Bill would take care of it, and would always want to help us in the future if we needed it. And we know that's how it is with you as well."

"And as Ron told you," added Arthur, "we're doing fairly well now. He's right, with fewer children in the house, there have been fewer expenses. Now, there are always things we could buy, but the fact is, we don't mind that so much. There's much more to life than having a lot of nice stuff. We're not thrilled that the kids had to use so many hand-me-downs, of course, but there are worse things in life. The kids knew they were loved, and they always had enough of things they really needed. But as for us, we really didn't care."

"But we understand your reasons for wanting to do something like this, Harry, and we do appreciate it," said Molly. "And if there was some luxury item I really, really wanted, I would ask you for it. I think I just got out of the habit of really wanting things like that. But Ginny said you almost looked pained, you wanted to do something for Ron, or her, or us so badly. And you have done something for us, Harry, and it has nothing to do with gold. It's that card, it's mentioning us in the article, it's just being this wonderful person that you are. That's worth so much more than gold, and I think you know that."

"But because of how much you want to do something, here's what I'll do: I'm going to give you my blessing to buy Ron the Firebolt." Harry's eyes went wide. "It was sweet of Ron to worry about my reaction if he just took you up on your offer. But I've decided that the broom he's using can go to Ginny, since she plays Quidditch as well. So you can get it for him anytime you want to."

Harry broke into a wide grin. "Thank you, thank you very much," he said happily. "And you know, I know that money isn't everything, and it's not even that important. It's just nice to be able to do something like this. I remembered how I felt when Sirius got me my Firebolt, even though I didn't know it was him at first. I've wanted to do something like this for Ron for a long time. It's not much, compared to what he, and you, have done for me. I just don't see the point of having this much gold and not doing something like this."

"Well, the chess computer has been a great success," said Arthur. "I wouldn't have minded having a go-I taught chess to Ron, but he's better than me now-but I couldn't find him at a time he wasn't playing it."

Harry smiled. "He's just so used to playing against me, and he's happy for an opponent who can beat him. More of a challenge. But yes, I've been really happy that he's played it so much."

"I think Ginny's happy about that, too," said Molly with amusement. "She said that it meant that she got to spend much more time with you than usual."

"I know, it was really good," agreed Harry. "It's always hard for us at school, because we're different years. This vacation was very good for that. In fact, except for the department store attack, these two weeks have been really terrific. I've never felt so... at home. It's a great feeling. Thank you."

"I suppose it's easier to appreciate when you haven't really had that before," said Arthur. "Most people get used to it. You know we want you to think of this as your home, Harry."

"Oh, that reminds me," said Molly, "will you even be going back to the Dursleys after this school year? Now that you're of age, it doesn't seem strictly necessary, does it? Also, not only could you stay here, but you could stay at Hogwarts if you wanted to, I would imagine. The teachers have quarters; you just don't use them because you want to be in your dormitory. I would think that as a teacher, you could simply stay at the castle if you wanted. Of course, we always hope you'll stay here."

"I know, Molly. I'd rather stay here too, of course. But I really hadn't thought about it. You're right, though, I can't imagine why I would need to go back to the Dursleys. The reason was always for my protection, but that doesn't seem to be an issue, so much, since I was going to turn seventeen this summer anyway. I would have had to leave at some point. I guess the answer is, we'll see what Dumbledore says. If

he says I should go to Privet Drive, then I suppose I will, though I'd really rather not."

"We'll talk to him, Harry, and see what he says. You should get going, it's almost time to go," said Arthur. They stood up. Arthur clapped Harry on the shoulder, and Harry exchanged a hug and kiss with Molly. He headed out to the living room, sat down on the sofa next to Ginny, and told her about the conversation.

"Let me know when you order it, okay?" she asked. "I want to be able to see his face when it arrives." He said he would.

They took the Knight Bus back to Hogwarts. Harry could have Apparated to outside the school's gate, but he preferred to travel with Ron and Ginny. They arrived at Gryffindor Tower a little before nine, and went up to their dormitory room. Dean and Seamus were unpacking their trunks.

"Harry, Ron," greeted Dean. "Have a good vacation?"

They chuckled. "Mostly," said Harry.

"Didn't you hear, Dean?" asked Seamus. "Harry and the others were attacked in a Muggle department store by some Death Eaters."

Dean looked alarmed, but not too much, since Harry had obviously ended up unharmed. "I don't get the Prophet at home, so no, I didn't know. Was anybody hurt?" he asked, as Neville walked into the dormitory.

"No, they were all okay, according to the article," said Seamus. "Harry captured two of them, and one got away."

Now Dean was impressed. "You captured two Death Eaters? By yourself?"

"Well, Neville helped," said Harry.

"Not that much," put in Neville. "I just distracted them, you did the hard stuff."

"Neville, those things I threw at them... they probably would have seen them coming if they hadn't been busy dealing with your ropes. All I did was that and the anti-Disapparation field."

"Oh, yeah, practically nothing," mocked Seamus. "You were just able to keep two Death Eaters from Disapparating. Anybody could do it." Harry wondered if he was being overly modest again, but he felt that what he said had been the truth.

"I didn't see the article, Seamus," said Ron. "Did they say anything else except the basics of what happened?"

"There was an analysis article," replied Seamus, "about why they did it, how Voldemort's still trying to take Harry out. They said that Voldemort must be getting desperate, that it's the third time in a few months, not counting the dreams. Usually someone who Voldemort wants dead ends up dead, but not Harry. The article also

sort of wondered how long Harry could stay alive, that there would almost certainly be more attempts."

Harry looked Seamus in the eye. "I'm going to stay alive, Seamus, if for no other reason than to tick him off. If he's furious that he can't kill me, then I want him to stay that way." The rest chuckled.

"I wonder, Harry," said Dean, "his minions don't seem to be doing their jobs. Why doesn't he just get you himself? He could have come to the department store."

Harry had wondered the same thing. "I don't know, Dean. If I had to guess, I'd say that while he wants me dead, he doesn't want it badly enough to accept any risk to himself. For all he knows, I could be surrounded by a bunch of invisible Aurors. He knows that Dumbledore's gone to great lengths to keep me alive, and he doesn't know what Dumbledore might have done. He fears Dumbledore, so I think that's why he hasn't tried."

"Harry is going to get an Auror security detail, the article said," added Seamus.

Harry raised his eyebrows, "I didn't know they were going to make that public knowledge," he said. "I thought they'd keep it secret. Maybe catch more Death Eaters."

Ron looked doubtful. "Especially after that, Harry, I think they figure that Voldemort would assume you had security anyway, so it's not such a big secret. Maybe they also want to even discourage the attempts, even if they'll probably fail."

"Thank goodness for the Auror training," said Harry. Neville nodded, and explained to Dean and Seamus. They were surprised that Harry got to train with Aurors, and astonished that Neville did. "I feel like somebody took Polyjuice Potion and replaced Neville," said Dean.

"That's not even the best part," said Harry, smiling. "Neville has-

"Oh, come on, Harry," said an embarrassed Neville. "Do you have to?"

"Do you think it's going to be a secret for very long, Neville?" pointed out Harry. To Dean and Seamus, he said, "Neville has a girlfriend." He waited for a few seconds, enjoying their shocked expressions, then added, "It's Hermione." Harry almost laughed, as their shock had deepened considerably. They gaped at Neville.

Neville looked at Harry, annoyed. "Are you going to tell everybody?"

Harry, still smiling, shook his head. "Just them, and Justin and Ernie, if I can before someone else does. But no one else, Neville, I promise."

"I have a feeling Hermione will tell a few people," pointed out Ron. "People are going to look at you funny for a few days, Neville, and then it'll be back to normal. You'll get used to it. But you can't expect us not to have some fun with it."

They spent another hour talking to Seamus and Dean about their vacations, then got ready for bed. Harry sat in bed, prepared for the next day's Defense Against the Dark Arts lessons, practiced Occlumency, and went to sleep.

He woke up at his usual time of seven the next morning, got dressed, and headed down to the Great Hall with Ron and Neville. They took their usual seats, and Hermione showed up a few minutes later.

"So, how did Parvati and Lavender react to the news, Hermione?" asked Ron.

She sighed. "I would just as soon not have told them. Like I've said, we aren't that close. But I figured they'd be offended if they heard it from someone other than me, so I told them. They were surprised."

Neville looked at Hermione skeptically. "I think you mean amazed, astonished, stunned—"

"All right, Neville," she said impatiently. "You know how I feel about you saying things like that."

"It's the truth," responded Neville. "You just don't want to admit it. You should have seen Seamus and Dean's faces. Probably everyone's going to react like that. You can't go around being upset at everyone."

"Watch me," she replied. Neville grinned.

"Hermione, you have to give people a little break," said Harry. "I mean, we were amazed, and we know Neville better than they do. Once we think about it, it makes sense, but it was just a bit of a shock. People still think of Neville as shy, so of course they're going to be surprised. I don't think they mean to insult Neville by reacting like that."

"I don't care what they mean, I just don't like it," said Hermione, obviously unmoved.

Harry saw Ron looking off into the distance. He looked where Ron was, and saw Malfoy walking toward the Slytherin table, with Pansy and Crabbe. He was surprised not to see Goyle with them, but as they sat down, he saw that Goyle was already at the table. More to Neville and Hermione than to Harry, Ron said, "Remember, Malfoy's out of his box, so we have to be careful, and monitor his movements as much as we can." Hermione and Neville nodded in agreement. Harry thought to say something to the effect that he wasn't worried about Malfoy, but the prospect of a storm of criticism stopped him.

Harry had eaten about half of his breakfast when he looked up and saw Justin and Ernie walk up. "Hey, guys," said Harry. "Have a good vacation?"

"Better than yours, according to the Prophet," said Ernie.

"Except for that, though, mine was very good," replied Harry.

"Good to see those murder attempts aren't keeping you down, Harry," said Justin. "We've decided that an attempt on your life also warrants a trip over here on our part."

"Well, you might as well just stay here and take regular seats at the table," joked Harry.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," said Ernie. "The rest of you have eventful vacations?"

Hermione had the look of someone who wanted to get something over with. "I have a boyfriend now," she said.

Harry watched Ernie for a reaction, but Ernie looked blank. Justin smiled. "That's great, Hermione. Who is it?"

"It's Neville," said Hermione.

Harry thought that Justin was about to accuse Hermione of pulling his leg, but Justin saw her face and realized she was serious, and so avoided her wrath. Ernie was speechless, with a look of undisguised shock. "Wow," said Justin. "That's pretty... unexpected. How did that happen?"

Hermione started to explain it to them as Harry turned back to his food. He had taken two more bites when he felt something vibrate in his robes. He took out his Galleon and saw that it was Pansy sending the emergency signal. He surreptitiously showed it to Neville, who took it from him and held it up so that Ron and Hermione could see it, but Justin and Ernie couldn't. Harry stood up and looked over at the Slytherin table, and found Pansy sitting there, talking to Malfoy, in no apparent distress. Harry suddenly realized that the signal could be a warning as well. He looked around as Hermione stood as well, followed by Ron and Neville. Justin and Ernie looked nonplused as Hermione stopped her story.

"See anything?" Harry asked the others.

"Nothing really..." said Hermione. "Oh, wait, Goyle's heading in this direction. Harry, get out your wand."

"He's probably just leaving the Hall," Harry said, dismissive of any danger.

"Harry, he's by himself! How often does that happen?" asked Hermione, very concerned. Goyle was closer, now less than ten seconds away.

"Harry, get out your damn wand!" Neville insisted urgently. Taken aback by Neville's manner, Harry did so immediately. He focused on calming his mind, just in case. He was sure that there was nothing Goyle could or would do, by himself, in front of so many people. Still, he was prepared, no longer taking Pansy's signal lightly. Ron, Hermione, and Neville already had their wands out.

Goyle reached the point where he would pass Harry and the others, then turned in their direction. No more than six feet away, Harry saw a blank look on Goyle's face as Goyle started to raise his arm. Imperius Curse, Harry instantly knew.

Ron, Hermione, and Neville didn't wait for Goyle to finish his motion. Ron shouted "Expelliarmus!" as Hermione shot off a Stunning spell, and Neville tried to wrap Goyle in ropes. Each spell bounced off, ineffective, as Goyle's arm reached full extension, held out in front of him. There was nothing in Goyle's hand, but he appeared to be holding something, and using his other hand to support it.

In a flash, Harry deduced what was happening. He realized that Goyle's arm and hand were in the familiar position, as Harry had seen in countless Muggle movies, of a person holding a weapon. He has a gun, maybe a machine gun, but it's invisible, Harry thought. He also has something that repels magic. Harry knew that any offensive spell would be useless, as would the Protection Charm, since bullets were non-magical... but they're projectiles, he realized. It's like having something thrown at you. These thoughts went through his head in a half a second, after which he instantly activated the Repulsion Charm the Aurors had taught him.

Hermione realized what was happening as well. "Harry!" she screamed. "It's a-"

She was cut off by the very loud sound of bullets being fired, but it sounded to Harry as though no more than five or six were fired before they stopped. Students in the Hall gasped in surprise as they heard the highly unfamiliar sounds. His face never changing expression, Goyle suddenly lurched back and fell, blood already pouring from the gaping wounds in his chest. The bullets had moved too quickly for Harry to see them reverse their direction at the behest of his spell, but it was obvious that they had. A few people close enough to see Goyle shrieked as Ginny came streaking up from the other end of the table, wand out. Harry felt slightly dazed. "Keep your eyes open, there could be more," said Neville. He, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny looked around warily, but saw nothing.

Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Vector came running over from their seats at the teachers' table. "Get Madam Pomfrey," said McGonagall to Vector, who left immediately. Harry couldn't help but think there would be little for Madam Pomfrey to do; Goyle had been holding the weapon nearly right in front of his heart, and so had suffered the wounds there.

A crowd of Gryffindors started to form, but appalled by Goyle's condition, nobody got too close. Flitwick was trying to do some basic first aid with his wand. "What happened?" asked McGonagall.

"He used a Muggle weapon called a machine gun, Professor," said Hermione, as Harry saw Justin nod in confirmation to McGonagall. "It's been made invisible, but it should be on the ground near him."

McGonagall took out her wand and waved it, and suddenly everyone could see a small, modern-looking machine gun lying near Goyle's profusely bleeding body. Harry actually thought he could see blood pulsing out of Goyle's chest. "That is what made that sound?" McGonagall asked.

Hermione nodded. "He fired it at Harry. I don't know why they hit him and not..." she trailed off, realizing.

"You used the Repulsion Charm," said McGonagall.

Harry nodded. "The Aurors taught me that," he confirmed. "I couldn't think of anything else to do. Their spells didn't work on him, I don't know why."

"He was under the Imperius Curse, Professor," said Hermione. "His eyes... I could tell."

"Voldemort?" asked Ron. Harry, Hermione, and McGonagall nodded, as Madam Pomfrey rushed into the Hall and knelt next to Goyle. She gasped at the damage and the amount of blood on the floor; Flitwick had been able to do little. She inspected Goyle for a few seconds, then stood up, facing McGonagall.

"He's dead, Minerva," she said, as those in the Hall who could hear her gasped. "Even if I'd been right here when it happened, even if we could have Disapparated him away, it wouldn't have made any difference. He lost liters of blood, his heart's been practically shredded. What kind of disgusting weapon..." She saw the machine gun next to him.

Dumbledore walked into the Hall, and in seconds had reached Harry and the others. "What happened?" he asked Harry, after making a quick survey of the scene.

"Goyle walked over," Harry said, realizing the whole Hall, now silent, was trying to listen. "We were on guard, because he's never alone, it was very unusual. He stopped right there, and made a motion that looked like an attack, lifting something up. Ron, Hermione, and Neville hit him with spells, but they bounced off. From the way he was holding his arm and hand, I realized it was a Muggle machine gun, made invisible, and he was going to fire at me. I used the Repulsion Charm, and the bullets hit him instead. Hermione and I think he was under the Imperius Curse. He had a very blank look in his eyes."

Dumbledore nodded and turned to talk to McGonagall, but Harry was not listening. He felt odd, as if he should be feeling something, but wasn't. Did I just kill someone? he wondered. Dazed, he felt Ginny take his hand.

Dumbledore faced the Hall. "Your attention, please. An attempt, I should say, another attempt, has been made on Professor Potter's life. Gregory Goyle, very likely under the Imperius Curse and directed by Voldemort, attempted to use a Muggle weapon to kill Professor Potter. Mr. Goyle was also wearing a device which negates magic for a limited time, and so could not be Disarmed, which Professor Potter's

friends attempted to do. Professor Potter used the Repulsion Charm as a defensive measure, and the bullets intended for him instead struck and killed his attacker. I wish to emphasize that this was the only option available to Professor Potter, and he is in no way responsible for Mr. Goyle's death." Harry wondered if Dumbledore was saying that for his benefit, or to stop rumors from spreading.

Dumbledore paused, then continued. "There will be no classes today; the classes scheduled for today will be held at later times to be decided. Everyone will return to their quarters until further notice. Prefects, please make sure all students from your House have returned, then report to your Head of House for further instructions."

Hermione and Ron were obviously in no mood to let Harry out of their sight, which Dumbledore could tell immediately. "Harry will be safe, I promise you," Dumbledore said to them kindly. They nodded, and started herding the Gryffindors back to Gryffindor Tower. Ginny squeezed Harry's hand, whispered "It'll be okay," and reluctantly followed Ron and Hermione.

Harry glanced at Justin and Ernie, and realized they knew something the others didn't. He stepped closer to Dumbledore and whispered, "Sir, please ask Justin and Ernie to stay back a moment." Immediately, Dumbledore said, "Mr. Macmillan, Mr. Finch-Fletchley, would you remain a moment, please." Looking confused, they did so, Ernie leaving Hannah Abbott to guide the Hufflepuffs back to their living area.

All the students had gone. With Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape at his back, Harry faced the two. "Justin, Ernie... what I'm about to say is very serious, very important, and very confidential." He looked at them for a moment to emphasize it, then continued. "You heard me say, so the Hall could hear, that we were alerted to danger by Goyle's approach. As you've probably already figured out, that's not exactly true. You saw that we knew there was danger before we knew what it was. Hermione just recognized Goyle as that danger."

They nodded. "I was wondering," said Ernie.

"I strongly suggest," said Dumbledore, "that you wonder about it no further."

Harry nodded. "You've had to have guessed, then, that we were alerted to the danger by something else. I can't tell you what that is, and you shouldn't try to guess. If you had gone back to the Hufflepuff common room and said to others, 'They knew about the danger before they saw Goyle,' it would have gotten around, and there's every chance that the way I got that warning would go away. My life was saved by that warning, and might be again in the future. You mustn't tell anyone about this, and it's better if you don't talk about it among yourselves, in case you're overheard."

"Are you both comfortable in feeling that you can comply with Harry's request?" asked Dumbledore. Both nodded somberly. "Thank you," said Harry.

"You may now return to your common room," said Dumbledore. They turned and left without another word.

The Hall was nearly empty; only Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape remained. Flitwick was helping Madam Pomfrey move the body to the infirmary.

"Harry," said Dumbledore gently. "Are you all right?" Harry understood that Dumbledore was referring to his emotional state.

"I'm just kind of numb," he said. "I've never... I mean, I know I didn't kill him, exactly, but I kind of did, in a way. I just don't know what to think."

"You should think, Harry," said McGonagall, "that you did what you had to do."

"The death is tragic, regardless of the circumstances, but was unavoidable," agreed Dumbledore. "I know that you would have preferred that he been taken into custody than that he died, but that was not an option."

"But he didn't choose what he did, did he?" pressed Harry. "If he was under the Imperius Curse, he may not have wanted to kill me."

"That is indeed possible, Harry," agreed Dumbledore. "We will never know what he wanted or did not want, just that he was a pawn of Voldemort's. But you must not hold yourself responsible."

"That's the strange thing, I don't," said Harry. "I would think I would, but I don't. And I don't know if it's because it was Goyle, and if I would feel differently if it were anyone else, some random person put under the Imperius Curse. He may or may not have been willing, but his father obviously was." He paused. "Why did they place him under the Imperius Curse, though? Why not try to get him to do it willingly?"

"Because while he might have killed you willingly, Harry, he would not have done it willingly with no regard for the consequences to him. Goyle had no means of escape, and would obviously have been captured had he killed you. This was of course irrelevant to Voldemort, who clearly put him under the Imperius Curse to force him to disregard his self-interest."

"But why so soon after... wait, how long does the Imperius Curse last?"

"Yes, Harry, it lasts less than a day. From Voldemort's perspective, it had to be done now, or not at all." Dumbledore changed topics. "Harry, how were you alerted to the danger?"

"These," he said, taking the fake Galleon out of his pocket. "Hermione made them for signaling. Pansy sent me the emergency signal; we looked around and saw Goyle. She must have known it was going to happen; I'm surprised she didn't break her cover to warn me more directly."

Dumbledore shook his head. "Unless I am very much mistaken, Harry, we will discover that Pansy was not told anything. Even Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Crabbe will not have known, as from Voldemort's perspective, they did not need to. Pansy must have made the same deduction that you and Hermione did, and signaled you so you would be on the alert."

Harry nodded, impressed. If that was true, then Pansy had definitely saved his life. Though he had said that to Justin and Ernie, he hadn't been exactly sure.

"Severus, please send Miss Parkinson to my office. After she has returned, please send Mr. Malfoy, then Mr. Crabbe." Snape left the Hall, and Dumbledore motioned for Harry to accompany him to his office

A few minutes later, they were in Dumbledore's office, and there was a knock on the door. It opened, and Pansy walked in. As she had after the Quidditch match, she ran over to Harry and hugged him, holding on tightly. When she released him, he looked into her eyes. "You saved my life, Pansy. Thank you... seems like too little to say, but it's all I can think of right now." She looked back at him proudly.

"Indeed, Pansy, you have done us all a great service, and you have our profound thanks... even from those who cannot yet know what you have done," said Dumbledore. "May I ask, on the basis of what information did you signal Harry?"

"Malfoy had been talking about how strangely Goyle had been acting ever since they got back. He mentioned it a little in the common room last night, and then again as we were heading to breakfast. Goyle wasn't hanging out with Malfoy or Crabbe, or doing anything he usually did. Malfoy obviously had no idea what was happening, or else he might not have said anything, even to me. When I saw Goyle at breakfast, he just looked so strange. Then he just got up, without a word, and walked away. When I saw him heading in Harry's direction, I knew it could look like he was just leaving the Hall, but he never leaves that way.

"I seriously thought about breaking cover, even though I didn't know what was going on. But I realized I wouldn't be able to do anything useful, and anyway, I could be wrong, and then my cover would be blown. So I decided to send the signal, and pray that Harry made the right conclusions."

"In that case," said Harry, "the only smart thing I did was to show the Galleon to the others. I thought it was nothing, but they were smart enough to take it seriously."

"So, had Pansy not signaled you, Harry, you would surely be dead," said Dumbledore. "You would not have noticed Goyle's approach, and he surely would have been able to fire on you before you could have known what was going on. Even if you had reacted quickly, you would have chosen a conventional spell, such as your friends

did, which would have been ineffective."

Harry nodded, and took Pansy's hand. "Thank you. I know I already said it, but I'll say it again. I guess I should admit that I shouldn't have told you all those times to come out in the open."

"It was because you were worried, Harry, I understand," she said, squeezing his hand. "But I'm glad you said that."

"Sir," Harry said to Dumbledore, "there's one thing I don't understand. We have to assume that Voldemort figures he's got three shots at me-Goyle, Crabbe, and Malfoy. Now there's two left. Why didn't they just train Goyle as a Death Eater like they did with Nott? It seems like they could have put him to better use."

Dumbledore shook his head. "As we have seen, Harry, Voldemort has no regard for the interests of the people he uses, ally or enemy. He could have put anyone under the Imperius Curse, but if he abducted a Hogwarts student to do so, the student's disappearance would have been noticed, as would the change in their behavior. It had to be someone whose relatives were willing. As for training him, that takes quite a while; it is not something that can be done in two weeks. Even you, with great natural talent, still have a ways to go to reach Auror-level skill, though you did accomplish much over the six days of your training. While many Death Eaters do not have Auror-level skill, Mr. Goyle had below-average magical talent, and was no doubt considered unsuitable to be made a Death Eater. Voldemort would have considered him a low-value resource. The only thing that made him useful at all was that he was a Hogwarts student.

"What Voldemort did, unfortunately, must be seen apart from the terrible human cost-as tactically and strategically sound, from his point of view. To have Mr. Goyle use a machine gun was a brilliant idea, given the circumstances. You could not Disapparate, and Fawkes could not have helped you. You would not be expecting it, and once Goyle was given a means of defense against most common spells, you had one and only one defense. The plan was almost perfect; so many elements were needed to foil it. Had the Aurors not taught you the Repulsion Charm, had Pansy not signaled you, had your friends not been assiduous in your defense, had you not been Muggle-raised... if even one of those were absent, you would be dead. From Voldemort's point of view, the plan had a low cost and a high probability of success."

Harry chuckled; Pansy looked at him in surprise. "I was just thinking about how angry Voldemort must be right now. He must think I'm charmed or something. I can imagine him thinking, 'What do I have to do to kill him?' There is some satisfaction in him feeling that way. He won't have another chance for months."

"Not necessarily, Harry," pointed out Pansy. "Even if we assume that Crabbe is no more useful to Voldemort than Goyle was, there's still Malfoy. We have to assume that he's getting instructions from Voldemort. He's going to be very careful, whatever he does. I just hope I can get him to confide in me. I'm very glad I didn't end up breaking my cover. You still need me."

Harry could not argue with that. He said, "Is there any chance, sir, that Pansy could be suspected from what happened today? I mean, we were on the alert before there was any reason to be."

Pansy opened her mouth to protest, but Dumbledore spoke first. "It is a legitimate question, Pansy, one that must be considered," he said. "It was quite clever of you, Harry, to say what you said earlier about Mr. Goyle's approach being unusual. It is perhaps a small stretch, but given the recent attempts on your life, no one—including Mr. Malfoy—will think it terribly strange that your friends were on their guard at seeing something unusual, and reacted defensively. More importantly, no suspicion will fall on Pansy, because there was nothing for her to know. A person cannot be suspected of leaking information they did not have, and Mr. Malfoy will know she did not have it, because he did not. There is no reason for anyone to suspect her."

He paused, and gave Pansy a grave look. "Pansy, I am sure that you would wish me to expel Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Crabbe, even in the absence of a reason to do so. It pains me that I feel I cannot do this. I know that I am putting Harry at risk, and also putting you at risk, for the sake of abstract principles. But they are important ones."

To Harry's surprise, she nodded. "I understand, sir. Do you know about the notebooks that Harry bought for Hermione and I?" Dumbledore shook his head, and she explained. Then she said, "I've asked Hermione some questions about what you said last time, about what happens when you ignore principles because of fear. She said Harry asked her about it, too. She told me a lot of stuff, gave some good examples of the kind of thing that can happen. She'd make a very good History of Magic teacher. But I understand a little better why you do this the way you do. I can't say it doesn't frustrate me, but given how much you love Harry, sir, it's very noble of you to do it this way."

"Thank you, Pansy, I appreciate that," said Dumbledore. "One always wishes one's actions to be understood in the proper context, especially when the context is a subtle and nuanced one such as this. I also wish to express my own deep appreciation and admiration for what you are doing. I know it is very difficult." Harry nodded in agreement.

She looked at him with concern. "I'll just be happy when it's all over, when you're not in danger anymore, at least at Hogwarts."

"So will I, believe me," agreed Harry.

Dumbledore rose. "You should be returning to the Slytherin area now, Pansy. Of course, you understand that you should give the impression that I simply asked you what you knew about Mr. Goyle's actions, as I will be asking Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Crabbe. Being seen as under suspicion by me will assist your cover, though it will not make you popular around the school."

She gave him a wan smile. "You mean, it'll make me even more disliked and unpopular than I already am. Believe me, that's not anything I'm worried about." She turned to Harry. "Harry, when I send the emergency signal, please, always take it very seriously. Assume that your life is under threat, and take every precaution you can. I care about you so much..."

Harry nodded, suddenly feeling guilty about not having considered Goyle much of a threat. "I will, I promise," he said. She gave him a last concerned look, nodded, and left.

"You should head back to Gryffindor Tower, Harry," said Dumbledore. "After lunch, students will be able to move freely again."

"I understand. When will my classes be rescheduled, sir?"

"Most of the classes will be made up on Saturday, but I was vague about that earlier because you have commitments with the Aurors on Saturdays. You should consult with Professor McGonagall about what times are possible, both for you and your first years."

"Thank you, sir. I'll talk to her."

"There are two more things, Harry. After today's events, combined with what happened in the department store, I think it highly likely that your friends will want to accompany you and monitor your movements at all times. They will want to be your security detail inside Hogwarts. I would suggest that you resist your natural inclination to resist their help. It will make them feel better, in addition to what practical use it may have. This is almost as hard on them as it is on you."

"I understand, sir. I admit I hadn't thought of it that way. I've been too busy feeling sorry for myself. What was the other thing?"

"I wished to thank you for your Christmas presents. They were most thoughtful."

Harry smiled. He had bought Dumbledore a bag of lemon drops and five pairs of thick woolen socks. He was pleased that Dumbledore was happy. "I thought you might like lemon drops, since that's this year's password."

"Yes, I have always had a fondness for them," Dumbledore agreed. "In fact, I recall having one in front of four Privet Drive, the day I left you there. And the socks are very comfortable."

"Now you can look into the Mirror of Erised and see yourself as you will be right then," Harry joked.

"With sufficiently warm feet, anyway," agreed Dumbledore. "I think you knew that what I said was meant both to be humorous and to deflect your question. But I will tell you now, in all seriousness, what I would see if I looked into that mirror today. I would see you, as an adult, surrounded by a loving wife and family, fulfilled, happy, and safe."

Harry felt a lump in his throat. "Thank you..." he almost automatically said 'sir,' but changed his mind. "Thank you, Albus. That means a lot to me."

"I am very glad, Harry," Dumbledore replied. Harry nodded and left.

Harry walked back to Gryffindor Tower alone, reflecting that such solitude was about to become uncommon. "Chicken curry," he said to the portrait, which swung open. He climbed in, and was quickly greeted by the first years, who seemed to have been waiting at the portrait hole for him. Andrea Creevey hugged him, after which all the other first year girls did as well. Some of them thanked him again for the cards. He spent a few minutes talking to them and other interested Gryffindors about the morning's attack, and the one during vacation. They were all obviously very impressed that he had captured two Death Eaters, regardless of his emphasis on Neville's role. After fifteen minutes, the crowd dispersed, and he headed over to the fireplace, where Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny had saved a spot for him. He sat down between Hermione and Ginny. Fawkes joined them, perching on Harry's shoulder.

Hermione leaned over and hugged him by the shoulders, leaning her head against his. "Harry... oh, your life is so hard..." She looked into his eyes, wanting to convey her support. He took her closest hand and gripped it in appreciation.

He looked up and caught a glance at Neville, who was also looking at Harry supportively. Harry suddenly realized that this was the first time that Hermione had been physically affectionate with him since becoming Neville's girlfriend. He looked at her quizzically, and glanced at Neville. Hermione understood his meaning.

"It's okay, Harry, don't worry," she said, not moving her head from his shoulder. "I've already talked about this with Neville. You need our support, and I'm not going to stop hugging you or whatever, especially after you almost just got killed. Neville's not going to be jealous. He knows he's the one I want."

Neville nodded his confirmation. "Really, it's okay, Harry. I know she's like that, it's how she is. Remember, she was like that with me too, before we got together." He paused. "Besides, it works both ways, this isn't just something that she can do that I can't. She's told me that I can also be as physically affectionate with you as I want."

Harry burst out laughing, as did Ron, Ginny, and a few other Gryffindors in hearing range. Hermione leaned towards Neville and playfully pushed him lightly on his face. "Ginny! I said Ginny!" she said.

"Oh, Ginny! I thought you said Harry," Neville said, to more laughter. "But both are okay, right?"

"No, Neville, you have to pick one," Hermione said, going along with the joke.

"Hmmm... tough choice," said Neville, smiling.

"I sincerely hope not," said Harry. "Ginny's much cuter than I am."

"Why, thank you, Harry," she said. "It reminds me of when you said that it was better that I kissed you than Neville did, and now you say I'm cuter than you. I'll be over the moon someday when you actually compare me favorably to a female."

After he finished laughing, Harry said, "Sorry, Ginny. I didn't mean to... oh, Hermione, what's that phrase, it means that a compliment is so weak that it's-

"To damn with faint praise," she supplied.

"Yes, thank you, I didn't mean to do that. I think you're very cute, period. Is that better?"

She looked at him, seeming to be trying to find out whether he really meant it. Then she said, "Yes, that's better."

Harry felt very content, considering what had just happened, and realized why. He said, "Thanks, Neville. I really needed a good laugh."

"Any time," Neville said. "Any time I can think of something funny, anyway. And Harry..." Neville paused and looked at him very seriously. "You may not like this, but we're going to be staying as close to you as we can. It's obvious that you're not totally safe in the school, especially as long as Malfoy and Crabbe are still here. We know you can take care of yourself really well, and we might be more annoying than helpful, but-

"Neville," said Harry, and Neville stopped talking. "I understand why, and I'm not going to argue. Of course it's not my preference, but I know it'll be helpful. I mean, Pansy was the main one who saved my life, but you did too. You took Goyle seriously when I didn't, and your attacks on him helped me realize that offensive spells wouldn't work. I might not have gotten the charm going in time otherwise. So, I'd be a fool to act like what you could do might not help."

"No offense, Harry," said Ron with a hint of a smile, "but there have been times when-

"Yes, thank you, Ron," said Harry dryly. "I appreciate that."

"I appreciate your attitude about this, Harry," said Hermione, a little more seriously. "It's surprisingly sensible. We thought we would have to have a big fight with you."

Harry wondered whether that would have happened if not for Dumbledore's warning. "Looks like Neville's timing was pretty good," he said. "After you've just helped save my life doesn't seem like a good time to be telling you that you shouldn't help me. And Neville... you can still come over here and be physically affectionate with me if you want to."

The others all laughed. Neville got up, walked around the backs of the chairs to behind Harry, and put his hands on Harry's shoulders, trying to get around Fawkes. He patted Harry's shoulders a few times, saying "Thanks for not being a pain about this," then stayed around to pet Fawkes.

"Seems like the least I can do," said Harry.

"I have an idea," said Ron. "We've still got lots of time to kill, even before lunch. Why don't Neville and Harry practice dueling a bit, then you two can start teaching us the stuff the Aurors taught you, about real dueling."

Neville and Harry agreed, and they got up and started. Before long, half the people in the common room were watching, or trying to learn what Harry and Neville had learned. The rest of the morning passed very quickly.

As the days passed, Harry found his protection to be less annoying than he had thought it would be. Since his friends were with him much of the time anyway, he was often able to forget that they were there for another reason. A few things were different, such as that now when the Gryffindor team had a Quidditch practice, Neville and Hermione flew around the perimeter of the Quidditch pitch, alert for anything unusual. No one's schedule was free enough to watch Harry during the classes he taught, so Hermione contented herself with charming Harry's map, and the others as well, so that if Crabbe or Malfoy came within ten yards of Harry from eight o'clock to twelve o'clock the maps would make a loud noise.

Pansy was pleased that the others were taking such an active role in keeping Harry safe. She reported that Goyle's death had only intensified Malfoy's desire to kill Harry, but that other than expressing his wish for Harry's death, Malfoy was saying nothing about how it might be accomplished, or what he was thinking of doing. "Somebody must've given him a lecture about security," Pansy had said to Harry. "He used to talk more, but now he isn't saying anything." She added that she was being careful not to appear to be prying too hard.

She also said that she felt it would not be easy for Malfoy to do anything obvious, because the dynamic in Slytherin had changed even more. She said that only she and Crabbe made any pretense anymore of supporting Malfoy. The seventh years kept their distance from him, she said, and most of the fifth years and younger

students were outspoken in their opposition to him, even to the point of the first years keeping him and Crabbe under surveillance in unsubtle ways. Harry hoped they wouldn't be in danger from that, but Pansy assured him that there was strength in numbers, and that Malfoy no longer cared about what anyone thought of him. She said he knew that if he put one toe out of line he would be expelled, and didn't want to risk it.

Harry noticed that Hermione spent less time around him than the others did; she was often gone, and he assumed she was in the library, because of her heavy class load. Ginny made up for it by spending much more time around him, causing him to wonder about the situation with her fifth year friends. She told him that she had a talk with them and told them that while she wanted to spend time with them, that Harry's protection had to be a priority. She said they understood and didn't take offense, which Harry was glad to hear. "They want you kept alive too, Harry," Ginny had told him. "Especially after Goyle... they saw that with their own eyes. I think attempts on your life that they read or hear about are one thing, but seeing it is something else. It's not only them, but all the Gryffindors, and a lot from the other houses. I think everyone's keeping their eyes open for anything that seems like a threat. So, I'd say you've got most of the school looking out for you." Harry found it hard to imagine that he could be in danger considering that, but he knew enough not to be overconfident, that Voldemort's reach was often longer than he thought.

Harry thoroughly enjoyed his Saturday Auror training sessions, and was making substantial progress. His dueling was getting better, to the point where he was able to fight a few of the Aurors to a virtual draw; a few of the bouts got to be as long as five minutes. He also continued improving with the anti-Disapparation field; as of mid-February, there were four Aurors who could not Disapparate once he put up the field. The four started referring to themselves as the "Potter club," and were sure that their membership would grow quickly. Naturally, a continuing betting pool started, centered around guessing which Aurors would be the next to join the club.

On a rainy Friday evening in mid-February, Harry, Ron, Neville, and Ginny were sitting in the Gryffindor common room, doing homework and talking occasionally. All except Neville were a bit on edge because the second Quidditch matches were to be held the next day; Gryffindor would play Hufflepuff first, then Ravenclaw would play Slytherin.

"I just hope it stops raining," Ron was saying. "Bad enough to practice in rain..."

Neville nodded. "I don't see how you can play in rain," he said. "It's hard enough for Hermione and I just to do our patrols when you practice in the rain. We can't see a whole lot."

"We'll beat them, whether it rains or not," said Ginny confidently.

"I think so too, of course, but they're pretty good," pointed out Ron.
"Remember, they were pasting Ravenclaw when Cho got the Snitch last time. If that was any indication, I'll have my hands full."

"Don't worry, Ron, we'll try to keep possession long enough to give you a rest," said Ginny. "Besides, the Ravenclaw Keeper isn't as good as you are. He let in twelve out of twenty-one attempts. You only let in one out of eight. They won't be getting twelve goals off of us."

Ron turned a bit red, and said nothing as Ginny smiled at him, partly with pride and partly enjoying his embarrassment. Harry exchanged a smile with her. "That's right, Ron," he said. "In fact, I think it's going to be a shutout. I bet they don't get a single goal off of you."

With an annoyed smile, Ron gave Harry a 'be serious' look. Neville added, "If we were Aurors, there'd already be a betting pool on the outcome of the game, and probably the score as well." Harry chuckled.

"I'm pretty sure that gambling isn't allowed at Hogwarts," pointed out Ron. "I think I read it in the rules."

"You think? You're not sure?" asked Ginny.

Ron shrugged. "When you become a prefect, you're supposed to read the Hogwarts rule book, and memorize as much of it as you can. I read most of it, but I didn't bother trying to remember anything, because—"

"You knew that Hermione would be around, and you could always ask her," finished Ginny. Ron nodded. "What are you going to do once you graduate, and she's not around all the time to remember stuff for you?"

Harry and Neville chuckled as Ron looked up with mild indignation. "I remember the stuff I need to remember," he said. "It's just that she remembers unimportant stuff really well. I don't put much of a priority on remembering whether gambling is allowed at Hogwarts or not."

"Ron," she said, "what's the record for the fastest capture of a Snitch in professional Quidditch?"

"Three and a half seconds, of course. Why?"

She smirked. "Seems like you remember unimportant stuff just fine."

He rolled his eyes. "C'mon, Ginny, that's one of the most famous Quidditch records there is. It's right up there with Bruno Burnansky's streak of sixty-two consecutive successful goal attempts, or Paolo Renai's twenty-five consecutive captures of the Snitch. If you're a Quidditch fan, you can't not know that."

She was unmoved. "I bet there's lots more trivial stuff about Quidditch that you can remember just fine," she said. Ron smiled a little and didn't answer.

Harry heard a murmur spread throughout the room, and looked up. He saw Dumbledore's golden dog approach him, stand on its two hind legs, and lick his face. The other three chuckled, as they all knew what it meant. "How did it get in here?" Harry asked.

"It just seemed to walk through the wall," said Katie Bell, sitting across the room from him. "I happened to be looking in that direction. What is it, anyway?"

"It's from Dumbledore, it means he wants to see me," he explained. He gave the dog a quick hug, then got up. "It seems to really like you," she said, smiling.

"I like it, too," he answered. "Funny, I never thought to wonder whether it was a he or a she. I guess it doesn't need to have a gender."

"Or, maybe it's male because Dumbledore is," suggested Ginny.

Harry shrugged as he walked across the room to the portrait hole. As it opened, the dog leaped up and through the hole. Harry followed it to Dumbledore's office, where the door was already open.

"Harry, thank you," greeted Dumbledore. Harry sat down opposite him. "Are you all ready for the Quidditch match?"

Harry knew that Dumbledore was just being polite, mentioning something that he knew Harry would be thinking about. "Yes, sir," he said. "We were just talking about it in the common room." He went on to relate the conversation.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Yes, the Aurors are well known for that," he agreed. "And Ron is correct, gambling is not allowed at Hogwarts. Not so much because it is morally objectionable, but because it is considered an adult vice. One must employ a certain amount of self-control, which even some adults fail to do." Harry thought of Ludo Bagman.

"I wanted to let you know, Harry, that tomorrow will be a Hogsmeade day." Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Not a weekend," Dumbledore continued, "but just a day. It has been decided that until Voldemort is no longer a threat, students will still be able to visit Hogsmeade periodically, but the days will be one at a time, and not announced in advance. There will also be heavy security. The Hogsmeade visit will be announced after the second Quidditch match. Of course, people will have been unable to plan their day, but I felt that this was a reasonable balance of security and normalcy."

"I'm glad to hear that, sir," said Harry. He didn't think it was right that the students should never be able to go to Hogsmeade. "It sounds like there shouldn't be any problems. I'll be going too, of course."

Dumbledore nodded. "I hoped, and to be honest, expected, that you would. The symbolism would be unfortunate if you did not. It remains to be seen how many will choose to go. When I make the announcement, I will emphasize the heavy security."

"I think a lot will go," said Harry. "I think they'll see it the same way I do."

"It would not surprise me," Dumbledore agreed. "Much of the school has come to see things the same way you do. They certainly have embraced the challenge of your security."

"It's kind of ironic, really," Harry mused. "I can take care of myself better than any other student, and I have everyone looking out for me anyway."

"You can take care of yourself better than most teachers, too, I suspect," said Dumbledore. "That is not exactly the issue, of course. Which reminds me, Kingsley mentioned to me the existence of the 'Potter club.' You must be proud."

"Yes, and kind of embarrassed for the members," he admitted. "I hope they're not embarrassed, but they don't seem to be."

"There is no reason they should be, Harry, as you are so clearly exceptional. Kingsley said that he expects that by the time you are twenty, perhaps sooner, the whole complement of Aurors will be members."

Harry shook his head in wonder; that was quite a statement. "Sir, that reminds me, I was wondering... I've gotten so much stronger this year, I'm really surprised. I'm way stronger than I ever expected to be. Why do you think that is? Am I that good, just naturally? Is it from the curse when I was a baby, did I get power equivalent to Voldemort's? I mean, I've been working really hard, but this is a bit much."

"Yes, Harry, I must admit, even I have been surprised at the speed of your progress. I can only guess at the reasons, of course. Firstly, your motivation is at its highest, both because of the attempts on your life and your knowledge of the prophecy. Such pressure, burdensome though it is, will tend to bring out the full extent of your talent. Secondly, the attempts on your life and the Voldemort dream attacks not only increased your motivation, but your ability to focus, which has always been a strength of yours. You recall what I said in the first week's Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson about the importance of mental elements of spellcasting, and your experience is tending to give evidence of that. Your ability to focus is highly developed, better than that of almost all wizards."

Harry, smiling, cut in with, "I can think of at least one who it's not better than."

Dumbledore smiled back, and continued. "Thirdly, it is well established that the years between the ages of sixteen and eighteen are, for wizards, the time during which one's natural skills develop most strongly. And lastly, and I think most importantly, it is not only your focus which is important, but your type of focus. During the Voldemort trial, you developed the habit of focusing on love, and that is what got you through that, and was the basis for your new spell. Your new spell is

based on the energy of love. But I suspect that you have used that energy not only for that spell, but for all your spells."

Harry nodded. "I just got in the habit of doing that. It's kind of unconscious now, but at some point, I just started focusing on that particular energy whenever I did magic. So, you think that's what makes my magic so strong?"

"I am almost certain of it. It has given me a new perspective, in fact. You know, of course, that despite my age I am considered to be one of the strongest wizards in the world. I have always simply assumed that it was a natural ability, combined with much study. But your experience is teaching me something: I am now realizing that my own magic has always been based on the energy of love, and I simply did not know it, at least in those terms. But it makes perfect sense."

Harry was impressed, and had to agree. "It does make sense... especially considering that I only have this because of you. You taught me what love was, when I had no idea. I'm not surprised that your magic is based on it as well. Also, you're the only one who can also do my spell, and you learned it very quickly."

"As we have noted, love is a 'power the Dark Lord knows not,'" agreed Dumbledore.

"But I still don't understand something, then... remember, it's 'the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord...' I assume we agree that the word 'one' means I'm the only one?" Dumbledore nodded. "But then it can't be just that my magic is from the energy of love, because yours is like that, too. Wouldn't that suggest that whatever it is about me is something that I can do and you can't?"

Dumbledore considered. "Perhaps, but it may also be that it is something that you will do that I will not. For example, you are the one who discovered the spell. We do not know whether I could have done it, just that I did not. It is very difficult to say.

"You realize what this means, Harry. Considering all your progress, and all that has happened, I find it highly likely that a time will come when you are as strong a wizard as I am."

Harry was dumbstruck. He had never thought about it in those terms. It just seemed like an unreachable goal. "That's... an amazing thought, sir," he finally managed. "It's hard to believe. But to tell you the truth, I'd rather be as good a person as you are than as strong a wizard."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Thank you, Harry. But you may already be that. I talked to Molly after vacation, and she was positively smitten with you. It has been a long time since I made anybody as happy as you made her with your card and your affection."

"I'm glad I made her so happy, but that's not what I meant. You have lots of compassion, you care about everybody, whether they deserve it or not. You wouldn't have..." Harry paused, thinking. "I never felt especially bad about Goyle's death. I mean, I wasn't happy about it, but... it just didn't affect me. I watched him die, you'd think it would. I just think you would have reacted differently."

"You feel badly about yourself that you reacted as you did," observed Dumbledore. Harry nodded. "You should not castigate yourself for that. The circumstances were highly unusual. You had just recovered from a very emotionally trying incident less than two weeks prior, and then you were subjected to yet another attempt. I do not wish to overemphasize the point, but you are still only sixteen years old. I cannot say how I would have reacted to such a trial at the age of sixteen, but I doubt that I would have handled it any better than you have. I have not always been as I am now, Harry. To expect such a thing of yourself is not reasonable."

Harry wondered if this was how Ernie had felt after Hogsmeade; whether the expectation was reasonable or not, he felt it anyway. He also wondered if he would have this expectation of himself if not for Dumbledore's example. "I know... I just... feel like maybe I'm not such a good person if I'm not sorry that he died. I mean, I wish it hadn't happened, but... you know what I mean."

"You are already a very good person. He tried to kill you. He may have been under the Imperius Curse, but you and I both believe that he would have been willing to do it voluntarily if he thought he could have gotten away. We can still pity him, as he may have ended up very differently had his father not been a Death Eater. But given the totality of the situation, again, you are expecting too much of yourself."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate that you think I'm a good person anyway."

"You're welcome. On another subject, I thought you should know that Voldemort's followers have done what we assumed they would at some point: they have started killing Muggles. Three were killed earlier today. We have little doubt that there will be more."

Harry shook his head in disgust. "What's the point of killing random Muggles?"

Dumbledore looked at him sadly. "They simply enjoy killing. From their point of view, killing Muggles is safer than killing wizards, who could perhaps fight back."

"That's more incentive for me to keep up the pace of my training," Harry said. "The sooner Voldemort's stopped, the more people, especially Muggles, will stay alive."

Dumbledore nodded somberly. "Very true. In a way, it is fortunate that this did not start sooner than it did. I would have expected it to."

They were both silent for a moment. Then Harry said, "So, is the magic-detection field going to be up tomorrow?"

"Of course; I know you are thinking of what is best for Pansy. Yes, we will maintain the fiction that it was a standard security measure."

"Good. Thank you, sir." He stood to leave. "I'll see you tomorrow." Dumbledore inclined his head, and Harry left. He felt he had much more to think about now than tomorrow's Quidditch match.

Fortunately for the Quidditch players, Saturday morning was sunny, if cold. Harry sat with the team in the Great Hall, Neville and Hermione nearby. They probably would be anyway, Harry thought, but he knew they were here now as his security detail. Halfway through his breakfast, he saw three familiar figures enter the Great Hall and head towards him. He smiled and got up to greet them.

Tonks said hello to Harry, then moved off to greet Neville as Winston Clark approached, proffering his hand. "I haven't been here in quite a few years," he said as Harry shook it. "Looks much the same, really. Peeves still here?"

"Yes," Harry chuckled, "still causing mayhem. Which is sort of his job, I suppose."

"Good. Actually, I asked for this assignment, mostly so I could say hello to my daughter. I assume she'll be along when she sees us over here."

Harry shook the hand of the third Auror, a dark-haired wizard in his late twenties named Teddy Wirshire. "Hi, Teddy," said Harry. "Thanks for coming."

"No problem, Harry. Like Winston says, it's good to see the place again."

"I assume you three are also on Hogsmeade duty?"

Teddy nodded. "Ten of us altogether, including two in the Three Broomsticks at all times. But no butterbeer for us, I'm afraid."

"Why not?" asked Harry, curious. It seemed harmless enough, if they wanted to.

"Well, we can't be running off to the bathroom all the time," Teddy explained, as Winston nodded.

"You have to go sometime," Harry said reasonably.

"Didn't they tell you, Harry?" asked Tonks. "One of the requirements to be an Auror is that you have to be able to not go to the bathroom for eight hours at a time." Winston and Teddy laughed, but in a way that Harry felt suggested they thought there was some truth to what she said.

"Hmmm... maybe I didn't think through this business of wanting to be an Auror as well as I should have," said Harry, to more laughter.

Winston and Teddy stepped over to say hello to Neville, as Tonks approached Hermione and put a friendly arm on her shoulder. "Hermione. You did good," Tonks said simply.

Hermione smiled happily. "Thanks, Tonks. I think so too." Harry saw Neville blush as he heard this.

"Dad!" Harry heard, and turned to see Helen Clark run up and hug her father. "Hi, honey," he said, smiling. "He still your best teacher?"

"Of course," she said, as if to even ask the question was silly. "You should see all the stuff I can do now. I can't wait to show you over the summer. But I'm glad you're here, I get to have my two favorite men here together." The other Aurors and Harry's friends chuckled.

Winston affected a worried look. "I'm kind of afraid to ask which is your most favorite. I mean, I don't have a Chocolate Frog card."

Harry and the others laughed, and Helen looked at her father, annoyed. "Da-ad," she said, stretching the word into two syllables. Winston smiled and mussed her hair.

Ron stood up. "Time to go, everyone," he said. The team stood, and Harry moved off to join them, waving goodbye to the Aurors and Helen. They walked the length of the Gryffindor table, receiving cheers, and headed out towards the changing rooms.

There was a casual feeling in the changing areas. Ron looked tense, but not as tense as before the last game. When it was time to head out to the pitch, Ron simply said, "Okay, let's go do it," and they walked out toward the pitch.

They lined up on one side of the pitch, the Hufflepuffs on the other. The crowd finished filing in and taking their seats as Harry looked around. He could already see the three Aurors on their brooms, circling the pitch.

Dumbledore stepped forward and made a few announcements, including another mention of the magic-detection field. He also said that there would be an announcement at the end of the second match, and asked that no one leave until the announcement had been made. Madam Hooch then stepped forward, as the players moved to assume their standard starting positions, ready to take off.

"Captains, shake hands," she said. Ron offered a friendly hand to the Hufflepuff captain, who returned the handshake in the same spirit. It's so nice when we're not playing the Slytherins, Harry thought. He started focusing on the Snitch, even though it had not been released yet.

Madam Hooch blew her whistle, and the Quaffle, the Bludgers, and the Snitch were all released as the players kicked off the ground, racing into the air. As he took

off, Harry thought he had seen where the Snitch had gone. He shot off ahead and to the right, rather than straight up as usual.

Colin started his commentary. "Gryffindor takes possession right away, Creevey with the Quaffle, passes to Ginny, back to Creevey. Potter staying near the ground. Creevey maneuvering for position, passes behind him to Bell, who races for- POTTER HAS THE SNITCH!", Colin practically screamed, as the whistle blew and Harry flew across the field triumphantly, the Snitch in his hand. "Gryffindor wins, by a score of one hundred and fifty to zero, in a match that took... twelve seconds! Unbelievable!" The crowd was cheering, but it was a bit subdued, as if they couldn't quite believe it either.

Harry flew over to a stunned Ron, who was heading back towards the field. They landed together, and Harry slapped Ron on the back. "I said it would be a shutout, didn't I?" Harry said, smiling broadly.

Ron smiled back, still amazed. "Yeah, well, I was kind of looking forward to, you know, playing Quidditch. But hey, I'll take the win, believe me."

"Very sporting of you, Ron," replied Harry as the rest of the team moved in to congratulate him, with backslaps, hugs from Ginny and Katie, and expressions of amazement. They started to walk off the field, chatting happily.

"Harry Potter, would you come up here, please?" asked Colin, to a few scattered laughs from the crowd. Ron said, "Hey, it should have been me! I held them to no goals, after all!" The rest of the team laughed as Harry headed towards where Colin was sitting.

Harry walked up the steps and sat down next to Colin. "The Star of the Match, Gryffindor Seeker Harry Potter," he said. "Harry, I think I speak for everyone here when I say, how in the world did you do that?"

"I'm not sure, Colin, to tell you the truth. When the Snitch was let out, I thought I got a glimpse of its direction. It was really quick, like a tenth of a second, I was barely sure I saw it at all. But in Quidditch, a glimpse is often all you get, so I just took off in the direction I thought I saw it go. Then a few seconds later, I saw it again, and this time I was able to keep it in my sights."

"Amazing, Harry. And is there anything you'd like to say to your fellow students, who you've just deprived of an hour's entertainment?"

Harry laughed. "Yes, Ron mentioned that he had been looking forward to playing. But I reminded him that this is a shutout for him, so he's not complaining. Other than that, I don't know what to tell you, Colin."

"Did it enter your mind before the game to make any unusual effort to catch the Snitch very early on?"

"No, I had intended to fly straight up and do my usual search. I just grabbed at what small opportunity I had, when I got it."

"Not so small an opportunity after all, Harry. Is there anything else you'd like to say, before I let you go?"

"Yes, Colin... I'd like to welcome the new Slytherin Seeker, Thomas Dalton, to the pitch and wish him well. It's too bad that I couldn't have played against him last time." The crowd laughed at the implied comment, as the Slytherins applauded for Thomas. "And I'd like to say thank you to my friend Cho Chang for her support of me last time we were here. I want to wish both of them good luck." The crowd applauded.

"Well, they can't both have good luck, Harry, but I know what you mean," said Colin, again getting a mild laugh. "Do you have a rooting interest in the next match? I mean, if Slytherin wins, it would put Gryffindor in a commanding position to win the Quidditch Cup. Gryffindor could lose the next match to Ravenclaw, but still win the Cup, if the goal differential favored Gryffindor, as it does substantially at this moment. Your thoughts?"

Harry knew that, whatever his true feelings, he couldn't state a preference, so he settled for something close to the truth. "You're right, Colin, we could win the Cup like that, but I'd hate to win the Cup by losing the match next time. We'd only feel really good about it if we won the match as well, and I don't want to root for someone else to lose so we can win. If we're the best team, we should win all three matches. So, no, from the point of view of winning the Cup, I don't have a preference for who wins the next match."

"Quite a sporting spirit there. The Star of the Match, Harry Potter. Thank you, Harry," Colin finished, as the crowd applauded, even most Hufflepuffs. Harry headed back down to the field.

As he crossed the field, he encountered the Ravenclaw team starting to take their positions prior to the match. He greeted them as he saw them, and stopped with Cho. "That was very nice of you, Harry," she said. "Both about me, and not having a preference. But, honestly, you'd prefer Slytherin won, wouldn't you?"

He shrugged. "I didn't want to state a preference publicly, it wouldn't have seemed right. But honestly, either outcome is okay with me. If Slytherin wins, Colin's right, it's good for us. But if you win, I'll be happy for my friend, the Ravenclaw Seeker. And really, I'll be rooting for you. I was telling the truth, we should have to win next time to win the Cup. I don't mind that."

She smiled brilliantly, and Harry was momentarily reminded of why he had been so attracted to her. "Thank you, Harry, I appreciate it. It means a lot to me that you'll be rooting for me." He nodded and smiled, and headed back to his teammates.

"Very diplomatic of you, Harry," greeted Katie as he joined them. Harry realized that she was referring to the interview, not his conversation with Cho, which Katie couldn't have heard.

"It was more or less the truth," he answered. "I'm not going to be happy unless we win next time."

"Well, I'm not very diplomatic," said Ron. "I want Slytherin to win, but not pick anything up on the goal differential. That way, even if Slytherin beats Hufflepuff next time-which they won't-we'd very likely beat them on goal differential. And we've got a huge goal differential lead over Ravenclaw, no way they're making that up today, or next time. So a Slytherin win means the Cup is nearly ours."

Harry could understand that, but asked, "Are you really going to be happy if we win the Cup even though we lose the match next time?"

"Let's put it this way, Harry, I'll be happier to lose the match but win the Cup than I'll be if we lose the match and lose the Cup. I mean, I hate to admit it, but Hermione was a little bit right about luck. I mean, twelve seconds... that was because you're a good Seeker, no question. But it almost has to happen eventually that the Snitch pops up near the other Seeker and we lose. The percentages are going to catch up with us. So, I'd rather be in as good a position as possible if that happens."

"Well, let's just hope that the percentages stay with us for four more matches, anyway," responded Harry. Saying it made him a bit nostalgic in advance, knowing that he would only play Quidditch at Hogwarts four more times.

They watched the players for both teams get set and the captains shake hands. Madam Hooch blew the whistle, and they took off. Harry listened to Colin's commentary.

"And they're off, Ravenclaw takes possession, it's Corner with the Quaffle, passes to Boot, back to Corner, who dives a bit to avoid a Crabbe Bludger. Corner passes back to-intercepted by Warrington, over to Pucey, who has a clear shot, he shoots and... saved by Hilton! Nice save there by the Ravenclaw Keeper, who passes it out to his teammates. Corner has it again, he's being heavily defended, can't find an open Chaser, he has to back off and circle back for a better chance. He approaches again, dumps off a pass behind him to-Chang dives! Over in the corner at the Slytherin end, she flattens out and... she has the Snitch! Oh, my! Ravenclaw wins, again by a score of one hundred fifty to zero! And that match took... twenty-eight seconds!"

As the crowd cheered, Harry, Ron, and Ginny looked at each other in amazement. Impressed, Ginny said, "See, Harry, look at how you inspire others to follow your example."

Harry chuckled, as Ron said, "I wish Dalton had been the one to get inspired."

"Well, it's his first match, he's not going to be finding the Snitch in twenty-eight seconds," said Katie. "Very impressive from Cho, though. I always saw her as an average Seeker, but she did great today."

"Wonder who's going to be the Star of the Match," said Dennis facetiously.

"Well, Hilton did have a shutout, and one save, which is more than I had," said Ron in the same spirit. "He seems like a good candidate-"

"Cho Chang, would you come up here please?" asked Colin over the loudspeakers. "Well, I was wrong," said Ron. "Imagine that." Harry was interested to see what Cho would say.

"Congratulations, Cho. Quite an amazing day of Quidditch, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, I would, Colin," she agreed. "I can't quite believe it myself. I'd like to apologize to the crowd, who came out here but didn't get to see much Quidditch."

"What we saw is remarkable enough, Cho, I don't think most people will mind. Let me ask you the same question I asked Harry, how did you do that?"

"I don't know what to say, Colin, except that I started looking, as usual, and there it was, down in the corner. I went for it, and fortunately, it didn't move away before I could catch it."

"We all know how good a Seeker Harry is, Cho. Were you pleased that you accomplished more or less the same thing he did?"

"Actually, Colin, the fact is that it took me more than twice as long as it did him to find the Snitch, so I hope to do better next time. Seriously," she added as the crowd chuckled, "I've never even found the Snitch that fast in practice. I could probably play another hundred matches and it wouldn't happen. Just one of those things."

"You play Gryffindor next time, and the winner will take the Quidditch Cup. How do you see your prospects against them?"

"We'll definitely be the underdogs, Colin. They're a very good team-they've won the last two Quidditch Cups-and their Seeker is pretty amazing. We're just going to do the best we can. It'll be a tough match, no doubt."

"Thank you, Cho. The Star of the Match, Cho Chang. Thank you, everyone, and we should be hearing the announcement from Professor Dumbledore soon." Colin put down the microphone.

"You are pretty amazing, Harry," said Ginny, patting him on the shoulder. Harry grinned embarrassedly.

"Yes, you really are, Harry," grinned Ron, who Harry rewarded with an annoyed look.

Dumbledore spoke, his voice amplified. "Thank you, Mr. Creevey. At this time I wish to announce that students third year and above may visit Hogsmeade today." A buzz went through the crowd. "There will be a strong security presence in the village; a number of Aurors will be present all day long. Students must return to the castle by 5:00 p.m. This announcement is being made at the last minute due to security considerations. There will be future Hogsmeade visits; they will consist of one day of a weekend, as is the case today, and they will not be announced until the morning of the day in question.

"This was not an easy decision to make, in view of the events of Halloween day. But we cannot live under siege, out of fear, and the heavy security will make any repeat of that attack very unlikely. That is all; thank you for your attention."

Harry looked around; nobody said anything for a moment. Ron and Ginny had already known; the others looked surprised, and Dennis looked uncomfortable. "Are you going to go, Harry?" Dennis asked.

"Of course, Dennis. How about you?"

"I don't know," he said, looking down. "I'll talk to my friends, see what they think. We were all there, we all lost a friend. It's kind of hard, especially with no notice."

"That may be a good thing, Dennis," said Ron. "This way, you can make a quick decision and just go do it. You don't have to think and worry about it for weeks in advance."

Dennis nodded, but still looked uncertain. "That's true. Also, Colin said that I should go back there as soon as I can, so I can replace that memory of Hogsmeade with a better one. I suppose he's right, but to be honest, I felt like it was easy for him to say, he wasn't there."

Harry looked at Dennis earnestly. "If it makes you feel any better, Dennis... I've been through worse situations, more than once, and Colin's right. You're not going to feel any differently about it until you go back."

Dennis gave him a shy smile. "This is the problem with having Harry Potter as a teacher and a teammate... if I look at you as an example, there's no brave thing I can get out of doing, because I know you would do it."

Harry nodded in acknowledgment of the compliment, and said, "You need to do what's best for you, Dennis, not what you think I would do."

Dennis reluctantly said, "I have a feeling that what's best for me is what you would do, and not only in this situation. Well, I'll talk to my friends, see what we decide."

Harry and Ron exchanged a glance which communicated that they expected to see him and his friends in Hogsmeade. Then Harry said, "Oh, I forgot something. Go

on ahead, I'll catch up with you in the changing rooms." He ran off to where Colin was sitting, and picked up the microphone. "Excuse me... would Ernie Macmillan, Anthony Goldstein, and Thomas Dalton meet me on the field, please? Thank you."

The three surprised prefects met him as he asked. "Thanks... I wondered if you three would meet me at just before 5:00 at the school gates. There's something I need your help with."

Harry was determined to have an enjoyable Hogsmeade day, and he did. He suggested to Hermione and Neville that they spend some time alone, and as he expected, he was rebuffed. "It's good of you to suggest it, Harry," Neville had said, "and I think that Ron and Ginny can keep you safe enough, not to mention ten Aurors. But we just wouldn't feel comfortable. We find ways to be alone sometimes, but just right now, we want to be with the rest of you."

The Aurors were a comforting presence. Harry knew all of them, of course, and found himself wanting to chat, but he knew better—they were on duty, and couldn't allow themselves to be distracted. He did have smiles for Tonks and Winston, who nodded their acknowledgment without taking their eyes off their surroundings.

They spent an hour and a half in the Three Broomsticks, as much for the principle of it as anything else; they wanted to be seen there. As with the last Hogsmeade weekend, Harry visited several tables, talking to students from his classes. An hour into the visit, he looked up and saw the four surviving Gryffindor third years come in. He walked over, bought them a round of butterbeers, and joined them for ten minutes.

The five of them stopped at almost every shop in Hogsmeade, including Zonko's this time. Ron found himself disappointed, as though it had somehow lost its appeal in a way he hadn't expected. He was not at all comforted by Hermione's suggestion that it meant he was growing up and becoming too mature for practical jokes. He pointed to the one that Dumbledore had played on Fred and George; she responded that it was funny precisely because of its rarity. Ron looked unhappy, and Harry felt that it was because Ron knew she was right. Harry knew how Ron felt; he had argued with Hermione enough to know that it was frustrating to argue with someone who always seemed to end up being right.

As it got dark later in the afternoon, Harry suggested they walk down to the end of the road. As they did, Hermione asked him if it was because of what happened the last time.

"Yes, I think so," he answered. "It's kind of like what I was saying to Dennis, it's good to do the same things we did before, so we feel it doesn't have to happen that way."

"Should we tell Neville the story of what happened with Sirius?" joked Ron.

"Yeah, that was a pretty good story, Harry," added Neville. "I especially liked the part where Snape had a fit at the end of it, that he knew you did it but couldn't prove it."

"Careful, Neville, or I'll give you my little talk on Schadenfreude."

"What's... that?" asked Neville, who had clearly considered trying to pronounce the word and then decided not to bother.

Harry was about to explain, but Hermione said, "It's a German word, it means being happy when bad things happen to others. But what do you mean by 'my little talk?'"

He shook his head. "Is there anything you don't know, Hermione?" She said nothing but looked pleased. He explained what had happened months ago in his class of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff second years.

Ron didn't scoff, but Harry thought he wanted to. "I think you're expecting a bit much of twelve-year-olds," he said.

"I didn't think they were never going to do it again," Harry pointed out. "I just wanted to be sure they knew that it wasn't good."

"Well, I think it was very farsighted and mature of Harry to explain that to them," said Hermione.

Ron snorted. "Imagine my surprise." Ginny and Neville chuckled.

Hermione whirled on Neville. "Did you just laugh? He was making fun of me!"

Harry immediately decided that he was staying out of this. Ron, however, said, "What, just because he's your boyfriend, it means he has to agree with everything you say? If that's true, that must be the reason I don't have a girlfriend."

Hermione looked at him with distaste; Harry couldn't tell whether it was feigned or genuine. "Ron, if you'll get me a five-foot-long parchment scroll, I'll make a list of reasons you don't have a girlfriend."

Harry raised his eyebrows a little, as Ron gave Hermione a disdainful look. "Sorry, Ron," said Ginny, "but you walked right into that one." This observation did not appear to make Ron feel any better.

"But thanks for taking the heat off me, Ron," said Neville wryly.

"I think you're about to find the heat's back on you, Neville," said Ginny. "You should have kept quiet and let the two of them argue. She might have forgotten she was annoyed at you."

Neville shook his head. "No chance. I know enough by now to know that. In addition to being extremely intelligent, Hermione also has an excellent memory. She might have let it go, but she wasn't going to forget."

Hermione was now trying to appear annoyed at Neville, but his compliments had softened her. He put his arm around her waist, and she reciprocated. "I still wish you hadn't laughed," she said.

Neville nodded. "I know. But it wasn't mean-spirited, I would have been upset if it was. Ron was just pointing out that your reaction to what Harry said was predictable. What you said about him and girlfriends was much worse."

Ginny nodded. "Sorry, Hermione, but he's right. It was right on the edge between a friendly put-down and being nasty."

Hermione sighed. "Come on, he knows I didn't really mean that."

"The problem is," replied Ginny, "that there's just enough truth in it to hurt a bit."

"Hey!" exclaimed Ron. Harry wanted to laugh, but didn't.

"Come on, Ron, it's true," said Ginny, not backing down. "I don't mean, and I don't think Hermione does either, that you couldn't have a girlfriend if you wanted to. I'm sure you could find someone. But the fact is that you have this gruffness, this... being contrary, sometimes insensitive, I'm not sure what to call it. But I do know that girls aren't going to find it appealing, though they might tolerate it. Now, the way you were with Harry, after the department store, that was wonderful. We hardly ever see that side of you, and if you showed it more often, girls would be chasing after you. It's too bad that it only comes out under extreme duress."

Ron said nothing in response to this; Harry figured that it was because this was exactly the sort of topic Ron didn't like to talk about. Hermione, though, seemed to be bothered at the idea that she had hurt Ron. She looked at Ron apologetically. "Ron, we're always trading comments like that, but I feel bad. I didn't mean it to come across like that. I'm really sorry. But you know I wouldn't hurt you deliberately, don't you?"

Ron looked as though he was still unhappy with her, but didn't feel it was right to say so, because she had already apologized. As he looked at her, his expression softened, and he nodded. "I know. Don't worry about it." Hermione's expression suggested that she was still worried about it, however. She didn't say anything more, but she put an arm around Ron's waist momentarily and squeezed in further apology.

"It's getting close to five o'clock," said Ginny. "We should head on back."

Recognizing that it was now safe to speak again, Harry said, "Okay, but we have to stop at the Three Broomsticks first, remember." They headed off together.

When in the Three Broomsticks, Harry had asked Madam Rosemerta to set aside eighty bottles of butterbeer, in four crates. She had done so, Harry had paid, and now he left the Three Broomsticks with the four crates hovering at his side, moving as he did.

When they reached the Hogwarts gates, they met the three prefects Harry had talked to after the Quidditch match. "Thanks for meeting me," said Harry, taking in their surprised looks on seeing the crates. "I needed your help, since I can't go into your common rooms. I'd like each of you to take one of these crates back with you, and give them to the first and second years, since they can't come to Hogsmeade."

The prefects looked impressed. "Thanks, Harry," said Ernie. "I'm sure they'll appreciate it. I know I would have, in my first year. Why are you doing this?"

"Exactly the reason you just said, Ernie. I would have appreciated it too. They don't have to feel so left out. And I can afford it, so why not." Ernie nodded his understanding, and they headed back to the castle, each prefect causing one crate to hover alongside him.

Chapter 19

Ron's Birthday

Harry woke up at his usual time on a Thursday, two weeks later. He was unusually conscious of what day it was because it was the first of March, which was Ron's birthday. It was important for two reasons: one was that it was Ron's seventeenth birthday, which was a very special one for a wizard. Ron was now 'of age,' meaning that he was an adult for all legal and practical purposes, and could learn to Apparate. Ron had been looking forward to that for a long time, but would not be able to get his license until the summer.

The second reason that it was important, at least from Harry's point of view, was that this was the day he had arranged to have Ron's Firebolt delivered. Harry was a little nervous, because while in Diagon Alley Ron had indicated that he was tempted to allow Harry to buy it for him, he had never given explicit approval. Harry thought Ron would be happy, but he was still concerned.

As Harry climbed out of bed, he noticed that Ron had already left the dormitory. Harry changed into his normal robes and headed to the portrait hole, where he met Ginny, heading out as well. They smiled at each other in anticipation of

what was to come.

"You going to sit with us?" Harry asked.

"Are you kidding? Of course," she said as they climbed through the hole and started walking towards the Great Hall. "I want to see his face. You have the note that Mum wrote, right?"

Harry took it out to double-check. "Right here," he said. "I don't want his enjoyment of it to be spoiled by his wondering what she'd think."

"Well, let's hurry up," she said, walking more briskly. "We don't want to miss it. I know the owls never come this early, but still..."

They took their seats, Harry his usual one next to Neville and across from Ron and Hermione, while Ginny took a seat next to Neville. "Happy birthday, Ron," said Harry. Ron nodded his thanks, and said to Ginny, "You're sitting with us today?"

"Of course. After all, how often does your older brother turn seventeen?"

"For you, this'll be the sixth time," Ron pointed out.

She shrugged. "I hadn't thought of it that way, but somehow it seems more important now... maybe because I'm not that far from seventeen myself. Just another year and a half."

"I'll admit I'm pretty excited about it," said Ron. "Not that it does me a whole lot of good right now, since I'm here and can't Apparate anyway, but Dad's promised me that the day after I get back for summer vacation, he'll go with me to the Apparation Test Center so I can get my license."

"And then you'll move from room to room by Apparating, not by walking, right?"

"No, I'm not going to do that," he said. "I know all the stories, how some wizards just stopped walking when they could Apparate, and got into bad physical condition because they never used their legs. Personally, I think those are just horror stories the Apparation Test Center tells you to make sure you don't do it too much. I don't think that could really happen to anyone."

"Oh, no, Ron, it really does happen, it's well documented," said Hermione. "For example, there was a man in Edinburgh..." she trailed off as she saw his expression, then finished, "...whose story I'm sure you're not interested in hearing." She took another bite of her food as the others laughed, including Ron.

"That usually doesn't stop you," Ron pointed out.

"Today's your birthday," she replied, patting him on the face deliberately to annoy him. He gently swatted her hand away in pretended annoyance.

"Ah," he said, in a tone that suggested that she had been caught. "You won't go into endless detail now because it's my birthday, but every other day of the year, you don't mind, even though you know I don't care."

"Well, I do it naturally, you know that, but the fact that it annoys you is kind of a bonus, yes."

Ron looked at Neville. "She must do that all the time with you, Neville. How do you stand it?" Harry knew he phrased the question that way to get back at Hermione for her last comment.

"Oh, she doesn't do it to me, Ron. She likes me," said a smiling Neville, as the rest burst out laughing, even Hermione, to Harry's surprise. "No, seriously, I don't mind at all. I learn a lot. For instance, did you know that in 1682, at the thirteenth Warlocks' Convention..." Neville trailed off as the others laughed again.

"I'm glad I came over here this morning," said Ginny, smiling at Neville. "Neville's in good form."

"Yes, he is," said Hermione, leaning across the table to take Neville's hand.

"Hey, now," said Ron. "None of that at the table. It's my birthday, after all."

"They should do it if they want to. I think it's nice," said Ginny.

"Anyway, it's not like they're kissing or something," added Harry, partly to annoy Ron a bit himself.

"That would be fine, too," said Ginny. "Why not?"

Ron rolled his eyes as Hermione and Neville chuckled. "Be serious," he said, taking another bite of his breakfast.

Harry was curious, and asked, "Where do you go if you want to do that, anyway? There's not much privacy around here."

"Oh, there are places," said Hermione, still holding Neville's hand. "I mean, there have always been couples at Hogwarts, and they've found many places over the years."

Ginny gave Ron an evil grin. "And it's not just kissing, either. Some people—"

"Ginny!" Ron almost shouted as the others laughed loudly. He looked at them distastefully, then said, "It's Ron's seventeenth birthday, so let's annoy him even more than usual."

"Anyway, Harry," said Hermione after she finished laughing, "if you really want to know... I'll tell you once you have a girlfriend." Now the others chuckled at him.

Harry shook his head. "Just curious," he said, hoping this branch of the topic would stop there. Just then, the owls flew into the Hall, and seven cards and small packages landed in front of Ron, followed by a long, thin one, wrapped in such a way as to make it obvious that it was a broom. Ron's eyes were as wide as Harry had ever seen them.

"You didn't-" gaped Ron. Harry handed over the note he had made sure to bring to the table. "It's from Mum," Ron said, and read it out loud. "Dear Ron, It was sweet of you to decline Harry's offer that day in Diagon Alley because of how I might feel. So, part of my gift to you is to give my blessing for Harry to do this. Your present broom can go to your sister. Happy birthday. Love, Mum."

Ron still looked shocked. He took the package and ripped off the wrapping, looking at the broom as if it were a priceless treasure, from every angle. Harry was smiling broadly, greatly enjoying Ron's pleasure. "You know that there have been some minor modifications on this since I got mine, so technically, yours is a better broom than mine is." Ron didn't comment, still gazing at the broom rapturously. Harry looked down the Gryffindor table, but to his surprise, no one seemed to have noticed the broom being delivered, or saw it now.

The others were all smiling as well, happy for Ron. Finally, Ron looked up from the broom and at Harry. "Harry, I... I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything, Ron. You know I wanted to do this, and your seventeenth birthday seemed like a good time. Just enjoy it."

"Believe me, I will," said Ron fervently. "Thank you." Then, in a bit of humor Harry absolutely did not expect from him, Ron turned to Hermione and said, "Hermione, where can I go to give him a kiss?"

The other four howled with laughter. Finally, Hermione said, "Wow, you must be really happy, Ron, to even make a joke about something like that."

Neville had noticed that they were now getting interested looks due to all the loud laughter. "I'm wondering, people are going to be asking who gave you that, Ron. Are you going to tell them?"

Hermione responded before Ron could. "Why wouldn't he, Neville?"

Ron chuckled. "Wow, it's pretty rare for me to catch the drift of a question that you didn't, Hermione. He means that people are going to think it's strange that Harry got me such an expensive gift. Frankly, Neville, I don't care. People know we're good friends. I don't know if they know how much money he has, but it's no skin off my back if they wonder."

"I didn't assume you would care, really, but I just wondered," explained Neville.

"It'll just add to Harry's legend," said Ron. "' And you know, he buys his friends extremely expensive presents!'"

"Who buys his friends extremely expensive presents?" asked Professor McGonagall, who Harry assumed had seen the broom from a distance and come to investigate. "Is that another Firebolt?" she asked, obviously impressed.

"Yes, it is," answered Hermione. "Today is Ron's seventeenth birthday, and that's his present from Harry."

They all enjoyed her astonished expression; she looked as if she couldn't think of anything to say. Finally, she raised an eyebrow at Harry and said, "And the gold that you spent on this, Harry, was it also tainted in some way?"

Everyone laughed at this rare joke from McGonagall, including Harry. "No, Professor. I've never done something like this before, and I may never again. But it's not like I can't afford it, and it just felt good to do it. So I did."

She nodded in understanding. "It was very good of you, Ron, to allow him to do it."

Ron raised his eyebrows, impressed at her grasp of what had happened. "He practically begged me to let him," he said. "I think most people won't believe that, but who cares."

"A very good attitude," she said approvingly. "I understand because I grew up in a family of limited means. I know that this is a substantial act of trust on your part. But I suspect it is not misplaced. A pity you are a Keeper, however, as it will not be useful for Quidditch."

"Well, Professor, Ginny's going to get my old broom, but I've just decided something. Before every game and practice, I'm going to switch brooms with her. I'll use my old one, and she'll use this. That way it can be put to good use."

Ginny looked shocked. "No, Ron, you shouldn't do that. It's yours, you should use it."

Ron shook his head. "Ginny, it's completely wasted on me as a Keeper. I wouldn't do it if you weren't my sister, I'm not sure I'd trust anybody else with something like this. But it makes sense, and you know it."

"Your brother is right, Miss Weasley," said McGonagall. "It will still be his broom, you will just be borrowing it. I find myself rather looking forward to the match against Ravenclaw. Good day, everyone." She walked back to her seat at the teachers' table.

"Ron-" started Ginny, but was interrupted by Harry.

"He's right, Ginny. It's good of him to do it, and he doesn't have to, but it makes perfect sense. I didn't get it for him for being a Keeper, I did it because it's a great broom to have, especially if you're a Quidditch fan and player. But he'll still have it whenever he wants it, just for flying around."

"Say, how about a fly later on?" Ron asked Harry. "After lunch?"

"Absolutely," Harry agreed. "We can race." Ron grinned.

Neville spoke up. "What did Professor McGonagall mean when she said that Ron accepting the broom was an act of trust? I didn't get that."

Ginny answered. "What she meant, Neville, is that that kind of gift can cause problems if things are handled badly. Sometimes, people buy other people expensive gifts but then make demands later, or imply that they're indebted to the person who gave it to them. They can hurt them by making them feel bad about receiving something like that, or making unkind comments. Now, if Harry were to remind Ron about how he got the broom, or act like Ron owed him something-even as a well-intentioned joke-Ron would feel bad. Ron is trusting Harry that Harry won't do that. Now, we all know Harry, and that's the last thing he'd ever do. He'd feel terrible if he even accidentally said something that made Ron feel that way, that's why McGonagall said his trust wasn't misplaced. But that's what she was talking about. If she came from a poor family, she would know about it firsthand. In a way, Ron really is doing Harry a favor."

Neville seemed to understand. "You know, it's funny," said Harry, "I'd never even thought about what Ginny just said. I can see where it makes sense, but wouldn't you have to be mean or stupid to do that? It just seems so obvious, not to act like that."

"You'd be surprised, Harry," replied Ginny. "A lot of people can be mean or stupid... not all the time, but especially at stressful times. People get mad, look for a nasty thing to say, and it comes out. Ron'll probably have that broom for the rest of his life, so McGonagall's right, it is an act of trust."

"Thank you, Ron," Harry said sincerely. "I really do appreciate it."

"You're welcome, Harry," replied Ron, amused. "Now, let's see what else I got. Just because it won't cost a huge amount of money doesn't mean it won't be good."

"Good attitude, Ron," said Hermione, as Ron picked out a card. "Oh, this one's from you," he said to Hermione. She smiled and looked a little nervous.

Ron opened the card and read. Harry saw Ron's face change little by little as he read it, gradually softening. By the time he finished, Harry could tell he was touched. Ron looked at Hermione, saying nothing, but she could obviously tell from his expression how he felt, and her small smile got wider. "I'm not going to do that every year, Ron," she said. "I know it embarrasses you. But you're seventeen, and I just wanted to."

Now Ron smiled. "Usually it would, but for some reason, right now it doesn't," he said quietly. "Thank you, that's the nicest thing anybody's ever said to me." She leaned over and hugged him, whispering something into his ear. Harry saw Ron whisper back, but couldn't hear what it was. Harry exchanged a smile with Ginny; they both knew what they thought, and hoped, it was. Ron's come a long way this year, Harry thought.

After a hastily eaten lunch, Harry and Ron went out to the Quidditch pitch for a quick fly, as Ron had a one o'clock lesson. They flew for a half hour, taking great pleasure in executing pinpoint maneuvers accurately. As they walked back to the castle, Harry asked Ron if he could tell him what was in the card. Ron smiled in mild embarrassment and said, "Sorry, Harry, but I think it's one of those things that's supposed to stay between her and me. She said Neville doesn't even know what she wrote. Besides, you saw what happened, you could probably guess pretty well."

"I suppose I could," Harry agreed. "I hope I get one like that when I turn seventeen."

"I think you will, Harry. She knows you're not bothered about that kind of thing." Changing the subject, Ron enthused about his Firebolt. "This thing is amazing, isn't it? I mean, I've ridden on yours before, of course, but... somehow it's different when you know it's yours. It almost makes me want to be a Chaser."

"You could switch positions with Ginny," Harry joked.

Ron chuckled at the notion. "No, not with the championship match coming up. But we're going to crush Ravenclaw now, I'm sure of it. This broom will leave their Chasers in the dust, and Ginny's good, she'll make good use of it."

"Yeah, but you know what Hermione said... if I don't get the Snitch-"

"You'll get the Snitch, Harry. You always do," said Ron.

"I wish I could be as sure of that as you are," Harry replied. "But you saw what happened last time, Cho got the Snitch in twenty-eight seconds. Of course that's not going to happen again, and I'm not going to get it in twelve. But it just makes the point that anything can happen. You said so yourself after the last match."

Ron considered this, then, with the barest hint of a smile, said, "You'll get the Snitch, Harry. You always do."

Though he was a little annoyed, Harry couldn't help but chuckle. "Good to see that you take my opinion so seriously."

"No problem," said Ron, sounding as if he took Harry's sarcasm seriously. They entered the castle. "Oh, Harry, I'm almost late for History of Magic. Could you-"

"Put it in your trunk? Yeah, sure," said Harry, accepting Ron's Firebolt.

"Thanks, see you later," said Ron, as he headed off for his class. Harry went back to Gryffindor Tower, put his and Ron's brooms away, then headed back out to the staff room.

As usual, he was greeted in a friendly fashion by the other teachers as he entered. He sat down on a sofa next to Flitwick, who said, "Say, Harry, as long as you're handing out Firebolts..."

Harry chuckled along with the others. "I guess I shouldn't have expected Professor McGonagall to keep that to herself."

"It certainly was not going to be a secret," she pointed out. "It would have been noticed in practice, if nothing else. Besides, it is rather extraordinary."

"I don't see what's so strange about it," replied Harry. "I have more gold than I need or will ever use, he's a very good friend, and I knew it would make him really happy."

"Ah, Harry," mused Sprout. "As brave as anyone I'll ever meet, but in some ways, naive even for a sixteen-year-old."

In response to Harry's raised eyebrows, Flitwick explained, "It's not the thoughtfulness of what you did, Harry, it's the scale. People just don't do things like that, even if they're rich. The butterbeer for the first and second years, that was thoughtful. This is something else entirely. Even if you didn't see it that way yourself, you have to understand that others will. Now, we know you, so we don't think it's strange, for you. You have a certain... innocence, I think is the best word, that is one of your better qualities. You do something because you think it's the right thing to do, and you don't think of reasons not to do it. You don't let others' cynicism or expectations sway you. It's kind of nice, really. I hope you don't grow out of it."

"What would I do, except what I think is the right thing to do?"

Flitwick smiled sadly. "What a lot of people do, Harry. They do what people expect them to do, what they feel is appropriate, what is usual. Society tells us that we should do things a certain way, and we do. Most of us, anyway. Professor Dumbledore is a bit like you, in this way. He would wear unmatched socks, or eat highly unusual food, or make Hagrid a teacher. Don't get me wrong," he added as Harry reacted to what he said, "I like Hagrid, we all do." Harry understood that even though Flitwick said 'all,' he was not including Snape, who was in the room, and not known to 'like' anything. "It's just that a lot of eyebrows were raised when he was hired. He's not what you'd call a conventional choice. But Professor Dumbledore does what he thinks is right, not what people would expect or be comfortable with. I just meant that you're a bit like him in that way. Giving a friend a gift like that is something I could see him doing." Harry saw the other teachers nodding in agreement.

Harry thought about this. "Well, it's always a compliment to be compared to Professor Dumbledore. But then, I was a pretty unconventional choice for this job, too, wasn't I?"

"Yes, exactly," Flitwick agreed. "Even those of us who had taught you and liked you would have thought you were too young, or didn't have enough experience. Those are the usual, traditional factors in thinking about a teacher. We would have said, give him five or ten years, he'll make a good teacher. You probably would have thought that too. But Dumbledore somehow knew, and he didn't let how it would look

stop him. With Ron's broom, I don't think you even considered how it would look to anyone else. But there will come a time when you will, in such situations. I only hope that you'll do the same things as you would have done before."

"I have a feeling I will," said Harry. "I can be pretty stubborn."

Some of the teachers chuckled. "As Voldemort found out," said Flitwick.

"Not to mention Dolores Umbridge," agreed McGonagall. To Harry's surprised look, she said to him, "I told them what you did, Harry. I did not assume it was a particular secret."

Harry grunted. "I bet it's still on my hand, if you look closely enough, so no, I suppose not."

"We were all appalled, Harry," said Sprout, kindly. "Not surprised, mind you, but appalled."

"It's ironic, though," said Harry, "because she was right: I will not tell lies, even though she wanted me to."

John nodded. "Yes, very Orwellian." Answered by blank looks around the room, he sighed. "There really should be a class on the classics of Muggle literature. Nobody except Hermione would want to take it, of course, but still..." John spent the next few minutes explaining the plot and theme of 1984.

"Yes, John, I do see what you mean," said McGonagall. "These themes often come up, both in art and real life. But I have read much of Shakespeare's works, if that makes you feel any better."

"A little bit," said John. "But I'll refrain from my usual diatribe."

Harry hesitated, then said, "Excuse me, what's a 'diatribe?'"

A few teachers chuckled. Sprout said, "Don't say that, Harry, you're making his point for him."

"A diatribe is a usually lengthy recitation or exposition of strongly held opinion," explained McGonagall. "We would not characterize it as such, however, because the word has negative connotations. John is referring to the fact that he feels that Hogwarts focuses too strongly and exclusively on magic-related education, and not enough on subjects which are also taught at Muggle schools, subjects which cause people to be more well-rounded. For example, he feels that History of Magic should be a subset of a more general history course, and that there should be courses in literature, geography, and sociology. I do not disagree, in principle, but the fact is that most parents do not think that such subjects are necessary, and we must pay attention to what parents wish."

"Parents shouldn't be making that kind of decision for us," said John.

Before McGonagall could respond, Harry spoke. "Excuse me, but I want to ask something... could everybody-except John, of course-raise their hand if they know

what happened to Japanese-Americans in World War II?" McGonagall raised a hand, but she was the only one, out of seven teachers present. Of course, Harry realized, Snape wouldn't raise his hand even if he knew.

Harry saw John wince. "Everybody should know that, no matter what country they're from." He gave a three-minute lecture to the other teachers on the subject, then asked Harry, "How did you know about that? From when you went to Muggle schools?"

"No, I heard about it at the Weasleys'," he replied. He went on to relate the main points of the conversation.

"I've never met Arthur Weasley, but he sounds like someone I'd like to get to know," said John. "He's right, of course. Granted, there are such parallels in wizarding history as well, and one could argue that understanding wizarding history is enough from which to draw lessons. I would disagree, of course."

"Speaking of which, Harry," said Sprout, "I don't know if you've heard this already, but I have a few friends high up in the Ministry, and they say that your name's been coming up in their talks recently. Apparently you've become popular enough in wizarding society that some are thinking of trying to use your popularity for their own ends. They've been debating some anti-Voldemort measures, and they might want your public support for them."

Flitwick shook his head. "Talk about a babe in the woods..." Sprout nodded.

"Why wouldn't I support anti-Voldemort measures?" asked Harry.

"Because, Harry," said John, "the rounding up of Japanese-Americans was considered a 'security measure.' The phrase overlooked the human cost of what was done, and caused very few to question it. The phrase 'anti-Voldemort measure' sounds suspiciously similar. If you're a politician, you can wrap up questionable actions in a nice-sounding phrase, and attack people who disagree with you. I strongly suspect that whatever these measures might be, they won't only affect Voldemort. If the Ministry talks to you and asks for your support, you have to be very careful, or they could end up saying you support something you really don't."

"Given the events of last year, I think Harry has more than sufficient reason to be suspicious of the Ministry's motives. I do not think he is quite so 'innocent' as to overlook that," said McGonagall. "As to the rest, I'm sure Professor Dumbledore will give him such guidance as he requires."

"He always does," agreed Harry. "But I have to say, I'm not thrilled about the Ministry asking me to do anything. Why do they need me? Can't they do what they want to do?"

"They can't do what they want without certain levels of public support," explained John, "and they may think you supporting them publicly can help them get

that. Despite your age, what you did in September and the fact that you survive all these attempts on your life gives you a kind of moral authority, which is something Fudge lacks. They'll want you to lend them your moral authority. But the problem is, and this is what they won't tell you, that the more you speak publicly, the less people will listen. If you started being a Ministry spokesperson, soon nobody would listen to you, no matter what you've accomplished. If you publicly support the Ministry in anything, it had better be something you want badly, not just something they want badly."

Harry shook his head, lost in thought. Finally he said, "One thing I know for sure, I never want to work at the Ministry."

Sprout looked at him kindly. "Believe me when I say, Harry, that I mean this as a high compliment... you would make a very poor politician."

Harry chuckled along with the rest. "I'm beginning to get that feeling," he agreed. "But can I really say 'no' to the Ministry if they ask me for something? Won't it seem like I don't want to help, or don't care?"

"There are many people," said McGonagall, "who will take their cue from you rather than from the Ministry. If this were not the case, the Ministry would not bother to court your support. If you do not cooperate with the Ministry, those who admire you will assume that what the Ministry asked was not worthy of your support."

Harry found that hard to believe. "But I'm only sixteen! I hardly know anything about politics, or this kind of thing. Why should anybody listen to what I say, or think? I barely know what I think!"

Flitwick regarded Harry compassionately. "I'm afraid that this is an example of the maxim 'no good deed goes unpunished.' With your incredible courage, you've inspired people to act in ways that make our society stronger. But the price that you pay for that is that you get dragged into politics. There's really no avoiding it. I mean, you could always ignore the Ministry, but it doesn't help your cause to do so. But to answer your question, people will listen to you, not because of your expertise on the issues, but because they trust the instincts of someone who's been willing to face Voldemort and put his life on the line like you have. And frankly, Harry, I can think of worse reasons. I mean, I used to say You-Know-Who, and I can't say that I wouldn't still be if it weren't for you." Harry saw other teachers nod in agreement. "Now, I'm not saying that people don't have their own opinion, or will mindlessly support anything you say. But because of what you've done, many people will know that if you feel strongly about something, it's not for self-serving reasons. They give it weight, whereas if Fudge supports something, many people will assume his motives involve his personal political interests."

"Now, why would they think that," muttered McGonagall.

Harry didn't say anything for a moment; he felt overwhelmed by what he could be facing. "I'm just not sure I'm ready to deal with this."

To his surprise, Snape finally spoke. "You had better get ready to deal with it, Professor. You cannot waste the status you have while you wallow in indecision, feeling put upon. Those who would undermine your efforts will not be idle."

Harry looked at Snape in annoyance. He wanted to say, I'm sixteen, for crying out loud, haven't I done enough? But a part of him knew that Snape was right, cold and clinical though he was. Still, Harry was annoyed enough that he couldn't stop himself from annoying Snape right back. He looked up and said, "You're just saying that to make me feel better."

A few teachers snorted in efforts to keep from laughing, and some let out a chuckle. Flitwick muttered, "Wow, you really are brave."

Snape looked at Harry very coldly and said, "You appear, Professor, to already have plenty of people ready to do that for you." Harry wondered if that was a swipe at the other teachers for laughing at his comment.

He sighed. "You're right, of course, Professor Snape. I know I have to deal with it, ready or not. Professor Dumbledore would excuse my acting like this, he'd say I was still too young. Maybe I am, but I guess that's just too bad. I'd better get some opinions, and be really careful if I have to deal with the Ministry. And have a talk with Professor Dumbledore, which you can never go wrong doing. I wish Fawkes were here." Just as Harry finished saying the word 'here,' Fawkes materialized and perched on his shoulder. Harry chuckled and reached up to pet him. "Thank you, Fawkes. I guess I tend to forget that I can ask you to come, and you actually will."

"Perhaps Hagrid will remind you," said McGonagall. "You are doing phoenixes today, are you not?"

"Yes, he mentioned that last time," said Harry. "Maybe I'll learn something I didn't know."

"Perhaps, but he will probably ask you a few questions about Fawkes as well," she replied. "He has never had a phoenix companion as a student in such a class before. He will want to use you as a resource."

"I won't do that for the Ministry, but I will for Hagrid." He left and headed out toward Hagrid's hut, even though the class would not start for another half hour.

As McGonagall had predicted, Hagrid asked Harry several questions about Fawkes's behavior. Hagrid spent some time talking about the transition period between the older and younger companion, since that was what was occurring with Fawkes. Fawkes spent the entire lesson on Harry's shoulder, despite Hagrid's

requests to Fawkes that he move. "Sorry, Hagrid, but I was feeling kind of down earlier, and I think he knows I need him around right now," Harry had said. Hagrid had then talked about the phoenix's effect on its companion's mood.

After the class, still with Fawkes on his shoulder, Harry and his friends headed off to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom to meet Pansy. Sometimes Harry still met with her privately, but now that she was on friendly terms with all of them, sometimes one or two would join Harry and Pansy in the office while the others stood watch in the classroom. Today Ron joined Harry in the office, while Neville and Hermione sat in the classroom.

"Good to see you, Harry, Ron," said Pansy as they all sat down. "And happy birthday, Ron."

"Thanks," he said. "I assume you heard about my big present by now."

"Hermione's card? Yes, I did," she replied with a straight face.

Harry and Ron looked at each other, startled. "She told you what was in it?" asked Harry. "He won't tell me."

"She didn't say exactly what was in it, she just gave me a sense of it. Please don't look so put off, Ron. She tells me about what's happening in her life, and this card was important to her. I just wished I could have been there when you opened it."

"It was very... heartwarming, you could say," said Harry, to Ron's further embarrassment. "It had the effect that Hermione intended."

Pansy smiled. "I'm so glad, she was really nervous. She was afraid you might not take it seriously, or be too embarrassed. Ron, are you still upset that she told me about it?"

Ron squirmed. "Well, not really, it's just that--"

Ron was interrupted by Hermione, who had just walked into the office, obviously having overheard the conversation. "Ron, come on," she said impatiently. "This isn't gossip. You know how isolated Pansy is, she needs to hear about stuff like this. Do you think she wants me to bore her with stories about goblin rebellions all night? You take it for granted that you can talk to anyone you like, anytime, but for her--"

"All right, all right!" Ron almost shouted. Confident that her point had been made, Hermione walked back to the classroom without another word. Ron looked at Pansy guiltily. "I hate it when she's right," he whispered. Pansy giggled. In a normal voice, he said, "I'm sorry, Pansy. I do forget that, and I shouldn't. I was just... anyway, it was a great card, and it made me really happy." Harry was impressed; now Ron seemed to be trying to be more open to make up for his earlier reaction. "Unlike his lousy gift," Ron added, smiling at Harry.

Pansy smiled too. "Yes, I knew about that, too. I also heard that Harry was nervous about it. People seem to be nervous about giving you nice presents, Ron."

Ron looked annoyed. "Well, they shouldn't be," he said defensively. "I didn't have a fit or anything after either one, did I?"

"Well, I was nervous about giving you mine, but since you say you won't have a fit, then I won't be nervous. Happy birthday, Ron." She got up, leaned over, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. He smiled. "Thank you, Pansy," he said. She happily sat back down. Harry wondered if Ron was more accepting of the gesture than normal because of Hermione's reminder of Pansy's situation, but he hoped not.

"So, yes, of course the broom is fantastic," Ron allowed. "Had a fly on it earlier, it responds so quickly, it almost seems to know what you're thinking. And the acceleration... well, I shouldn't ramble, I know you're not that interested in brooms."

"That's all right, Ron," she said. "You should talk about the things you're excited about. I'm glad you liked Harry's gift so much."

Ron chuckled. "It would be hard not to, considering what it was. I bet Malfoy had a few choice comments about it when he heard."

Pansy's expression didn't change, but Harry winced just a little. He said to Ron, "Ron, we don't talk about that here."

Ron looked confused. "Why not?"

"Let's put it this way," said Harry. "If your job was cleaning up vomit all day long, would you want to talk about vomit when you got home?"

Pansy giggled, but Ron looked thoughtful. "I hadn't thought of it that way," he admitted. "Sorry, Pansy."

"That's okay," she said. "I really like Harry's analogy. Right now, I feel like spending a day cleaning up vomit would be a nice change of pace. Too bad I can't share that with Malfoy. Anyway, yes, he found out in mid-morning, and he's been going on about it ever since. He really couldn't believe it, he thought he must have heard it wrong. He can't imagine why Harry would do such a thing. He's been thinking maybe it's to make sure Gryffindor wins at Quidditch, or for Harry to show off how much money he has-which is funny, because Malfoy's always done that, just not by being generous-or just because Harry's addled, he's always liked that one. Later on, he started making insinuations about the two of you."

Harry laughed as Ron rolled his eyes. "Ron, next time we see Malfoy, let's have a big hug, how about it?" Ron gave Harry a 'very funny' look as Pansy now laughed.

"Yes, that's the sort of thing we need to encourage," said Ron dryly.

"I'd almost do it, just to see the look on his face," chuckled Harry. "Funny, if I'd given this to Ginny instead of you..."

Pansy nodded. "The whole school would assume she was your girlfriend. They wouldn't even ask, they'd just assume, and if you denied it, they wouldn't believe you. I've heard people talking, and even people who like you don't know quite what to make of it. It is pretty unusual."

"Yes, the teachers were telling me that earlier," said Harry. He related the conversation about the broom.

"Yes, I think 'innocence' is a good word," she agreed. "And the parts about you doing what you think is right, and not caring what people think, that's absolutely true. I like that about you as well."

Harry smiled wryly. "Remember, I'm Harry Potter. If I'd spent my life worrying about what people thought of me, I'd be insane by now. I think I learned to ignore it just as a kind of self-defense."

"Oh, I have to tell you what happened in our Care of Magical Creatures class," she said. "It was phoenixes, of course, same as yours, and he had Fawkes there. He read-did he do the same thing in your class?-this quote from a book-"

Harry and Ron nodded. "Yes, the same one, I'm sure," said Ron. In the class, when discussing how phoenixes chose their companions, Hagrid had read a quote from the author of the definitive text on phoenixes: "Many phoenixes do not choose to companion humans, of course, and those that do are highly selective about those they choose. Invariably, the person the phoenix chooses will be a person of great stature, one who is respected and admired by his peers and has leadership qualities. The person will also be highly compassionate, possessing great courage, modesty, and strength of character. But the phoenix is most attracted of all to one with a kind and loving nature."

"Oh, you should have seen the look on his face," chuckled Pansy. "He was acting like the author didn't know what he was talking about, of course. He asked Hagrid if the author had a phoenix, and Hagrid said no, he didn't. Then he said there must be something wrong with Fawkes, and the Ravenclaws started in on him. Padma said, 'I don't see you getting any scrolls, Malfoy,' and then Anthony asked Hagrid if there was anything about them liking people who cheated at Quidditch." Both Harry and Ron were laughing heartily now, and Harry could hear Hermione and Neville also laughing in the classroom. "Most people had heard about your giving Ron the Firebolt by then-it was just before lunch-and Mandy asked whether 'generous' was in the list of qualities. Hagrid said it wasn't mentioned specifically, but that the idea fell under the heading of a kind and loving nature. Terry mentioned the butterbeer, and soon there was a five-minute discussion of your good qualities and which ones in particular caused Fawkes to choose you. It was so hard not to laugh at Malfoy, having to listen to all that."

Ron was still laughing. "I just would've loved to see Harry have to listen to that, although we teased him fairly good ourselves. But what they did was better, because Harry wasn't there, so they were serious." He chuckled more, as did Pansy, at Harry's discomfort. "Poor Harry, subjected to so much praise."

"Even in our class, when Hagrid read the quote, I wanted to crawl into the ground," said Harry. "Well, as long as I can be a source of entertainment for my friends, then it's all worth it. Did he say the thing about why he read the quote?"

Pansy nodded. "He said because he was personal friends with two phoenix companions, he wanted to read us something from a book so he couldn't be accused of bias. It got a bit of a laugh."

"It got a bigger laugh for us, probably because Harry was there, being all embarrassed," said Ron. "Parvati said, 'At least the part about modesty seems to be accurate.' I almost felt sorry for Harry."

"Not sorry enough not to make a few comments yourself," Harry pointed out.

"I did say 'almost,' didn't I?" Ron replied. "Besides, you have plenty of laughs at my expense."

"I can't deny that," Harry agreed.

"Oh, I don't want to forget to mention," put in Pansy, "after that class, all through lunchtime, Malfoy was on a real tear about you, Harry. Not that that's important, but a few things he said were new to me. I got the feeling he wouldn't have said them if he hadn't been so angry at you. He made reference to 'the stuff that disappeared,' and suggested that you wouldn't be here right now if it hadn't. When I looked at him like I was surprised, he just waved his hand and acted like it was nothing. The next thing he talked about was overly casual, as if he were making too big an effort to change the subject. One thing that's always true about Malfoy, he's never very subtle. I didn't push it, of course. But the obvious conclusion was that he did smuggle some Dark Arts items in here after Christmas, and that they were found and taken. And that surprised me, because I was sure from what Dumbledore said that he wouldn't do that. What do you think?"

"Snape," Harry said simply. "Has to be."

Pansy nodded. "That was what I thought, too."

"Couldn't Dumbledore just have changed his mind, considering the danger Harry was in?" asked Ron.

Harry and Pansy shook their heads together. "We heard him talk about that," Pansy said. "He was serious. He's willing to risk Harry's life for the principles of treating students properly. He wasn't going to change his mind."

"But it's just exactly what Snape would do," said Harry. "Snape is the realist, the hardheaded one. After the Goyle thing, the next time all the students were out

of their dormitories, he must've gone into the Slytherin sixth years boys' dormitory and searched it, found some stuff, and taken it, without telling Dumbledore. The only thing I find hard to believe is that he would betray Dumbledore's trust like that."

"He probably figured he was doing Dumbledore a favor, saving your life," suggested Ron. "He doesn't care about Dumbledore's principles."

"But he cares about Dumbledore, I know that," said Harry. "He couldn't tell Dumbledore what he did, because it violated his trust. But he knew he was accomplishing the result that Dumbledore would want, even if he was doing it in a way Dumbledore wouldn't want. For Snape, the result is the important thing."

"So, do we go to Dumbledore and tell him this?" asked Ron. "I'd say no, you shouldn't. Let Snape keep doing it, it'll help keep you alive."

"I absolutely agree," said Pansy. "I respect Dumbledore's principles, but I'm not ready to put them above your life, Harry."

Harry stared straight ahead and said nothing as Hermione entered the office. She looked at him, and he saw a look of resignation on her face; she was obviously thinking the same thing he was. To Ron and Pansy, she said, "I agree with you both, but Harry's going to tell him. I'm not happy about it, but I understand his reasons."

Pansy looked shocked; Ron was looking at him as if he were crazy. "I can't lie to him," Harry said simply.

"So, you don't have to," said Ron, as if surprised that Harry could have overlooked something so obvious. "Just don't say anything about it."

"That's what's called a lie of omission, Ron," said Hermione quietly. "Harry knows that Dumbledore would want to know. It's really the same thing."

Ron was still bewildered, and getting angry. "So what? Since when did not lying become something that you're willing to risk your life for? Or is it because you think he's going to find out, that he'll be able to tell?"

Harry shook his head. "It wouldn't matter if he were a Legilimens or not, and I don't know if it would let him recognize a lie of omission. But his trust means a lot to me... I just feel like I have this relationship with him... I just couldn't get myself to do it. I don't even know if I can explain it, I just can't do it."

Ron was obviously not persuaded. With more emotion than Harry had ever seen from him, Ron looked at Harry and said, "You have to let Snape continue searching. This could get you killed." He paused for a moment, then added, "It could get us killed, too."

Harry was looking at Ron's face, but no longer seeing him; he was seeing the room in the Auror offices after the department store attack, remembering how he'd felt, how desperate he'd been for no harm to come to them. The thought that harm could come to them by his being honest with Dumbledore was very painful, mainly

because he knew it could happen. At the same time, he knew he couldn't not tell Dumbledore this. He took off his glasses and put his hands over his eyes, trying to hold back the tears he felt coming.

"I can't believe you said that, Ron!" said Hermione angrily, trying not to shout. "We all know that it's him you're worried about, not yourself, you're just using that argument because you know it'll affect him. Do you think he's forgotten about how he felt after the department store? You think he forgot about Pansy's body flying out of that chest? That's his worst fear! So, naturally, you wheel it out when you want him to change his mind about something?" She paused to rein in her emotions. "I can't believe you said that," she repeated, glaring at him.

Harry moved his hands aside and glanced at Ron; even without his glasses, he could see that Ron was both still angry at what Harry was going to do and chastened by what Hermione had said. Harry took a deep breath, and saw Ron do the same thing at the same time. Harry put his glasses back on, and looked up at Hermione. "Unfortunately, he's right, it is something I should think about. It's my responsibility, and-"

"No, it's not!" said Hermione urgently, again seeming to shout without raising her voice. "You're responsible for you, not us! He even said that to you that day! He seems to have forgotten it now," she continued, turning to glare at Ron again for a moment before turning back to Harry, "but what he said was true then, and it is now. You have to do what you think is right, and that's all. After that, we're responsible for what we do."

Nobody spoke for a minute, as all three seemed to need time to calm down. Finally Ron spoke, his expression contrite. "Harry, I'm-"

"It's all right, Ron, you don't-"

"No, it's not all right, I want to say this," said Ron determinedly. "Hermione's right... yes, it's such a shock, that never happens... anyway, I'm sorry, I really am. It's just that... maybe I shouldn't say this, either, but..." He took another deep breath, then continued, looking Harry in the eyes. "If I'd been the one opening that chest, it might very well have been your body flying out of there. And I don't think I'm the only one," he added, glancing at Hermione and Pansy, who both looked down. "That doesn't excuse what I said; I should never have said it, I wish I hadn't. I guess I just want you to understand why I'd do that. I really wasn't thinking... I just really wanted you to change your mind."

Harry fought back tears again, this time for a different reason. He knew how hard it must have been for Ron to say that, and it was a strong indication of both how sorry Ron was and the extent to which he feared for Harry's life. "I understand, and I'm sorry too. It's like what you said to me after the boggart," he said, looking at

Pansy, "that you didn't realize it was like that for me. I guess I'm so busy worrying about all of you and feeling put upon because of the risks you take because of me that I don't think about what it's like for you, I don't think about you worrying about me... but I suppose you do, don't you, all of you..."

"Of course," said Pansy softly.

"I try not to talk about it to you," admitted Hermione. "It's not like you don't have enough to worry about. But yes, sure I do."

They heard Neville's voice from the classroom, saying, "Me, too," just loud enough for them to hear. They all chuckled, breaking the tension for the moment.

"Thank you, Neville, I appreciate that," replied Harry, raising his voice enough that Neville could hear.

"Any time," they heard Neville respond. Harry smiled, but turned serious again as his mind came back to the main topic. He looked at Ron. "I'm sorry, Ron, I know you worry, and you know how I feel about you guys being at risk... but even with all that, I still can't do it. I'm not even sure I could say why, it's just there. I mean, I'll plead with him to allow the searches, but-"

Ron shook his head. "You don't have to do that, Harry, and you don't have to apologize. I can tell how much it means to you, and that's all I really need to know." He paused, then continued. "It's funny... we were making fun of you just a while ago, talking about the qualities that got you chosen by Fawkes, but it actually just occurred to me that this might be one of them, that this is how strongly you feel about Dumbledore, how you don't want to let him down, that lying to him is just inconceivable. It's very noble, even if it's frustrating."

Hermione nodded and looked at Harry sympathetically. "I had that thought too... not that it does Harry much good."

There was another silence, then Hermione said, "Well, you might as well go to his office now, get it over with so we don't have to keep thinking about it. I guess Pansy should go too, since she's the one who heard Malfoy say it."

"I'm going too," said Ron. "I want to be there, maybe say something."

Harry raised his eyebrows a bit, but had no objection. Neville walked into the office, holding Hermione's map. "There's a clear path to Dumbledore's office, so you won't be seen, but Snape's in there with him," said Neville.

"Good," said Ron. "Maybe he can persuade Dumbledore to allow the searches."

Pansy and Hermione shook their heads. "It's not going to happen, Ron," said Pansy sadly. "I've heard him talk about this, he's really serious about it."

"We can always hope," said Harry. "Let's go."

He and Ron walked up to the gargoyles, gave the password, and approached the office. Outside, they waited for Pansy to catch up, then Harry knocked and the door

opened. Snape raised his eyebrows; Dumbledore appeared surprised, but was his usual gracious self. "Harry, Ron, Pansy, what can I do for you?"

"There's something I need to tell you, sir," said Harry. "I got some new information from Pansy today. We don't know for certain that it's true, but we strongly suspect it, and I know you would want to know. Pansy, would you tell him what Malfoy said?" Pansy told him, after which Harry continued, "Even if what we suspect is not true, I know you would still want to know it, so that's why we're here."

"And what is it you suspect, exactly, Harry?" asked Dumbledore.

"As I'm sure you know, sir, to us the obvious conclusion is that some time soon after the attack by Goyle, Professor Snape searched the Slytherin sixth year boys' dormitory and removed whatever Dark Arts items Malfoy had hidden there."

Dumbledore was silent for a few seconds. Then he looked at Snape. "Is what they suspect true, Severus?"

Snape looked levelly at Dumbledore. "Yes, Headmaster."

Harry was sure he saw a flicker of pain cross Dumbledore's face, but it was gone very quickly, and Dumbledore appeared to be his usual serene self. He thought for another minute, then said, "Harry, I sense that you tell me this only with the deepest reluctance. May I ask why?"

"I'm sorry, sir... do you mean why I told you, or why I'm reluctant?"

"Both, if you would."

Harry nodded. "The reason I'm reluctant, and I'm reluctant to say this as well, is that I approve—"

"We," interjected Ron.

"We approve of what Professor Snape did. We agree that the principle is important, and for myself I would take the risk, but right now, any risk to me is a risk to them. Maybe this means I don't have the right strength of character to be a leader, but I can't bring myself to put the principle above their safety."

"As for why I told you anyway... I just couldn't bear to lie to you. I couldn't live with it."

Dumbledore nodded, and thought some more. "Ron, I see that you feel strongly about this. Is that why you accompanied them here?"

"Yes, sir. I wanted to tell you that I tried hard—too hard—to persuade Harry not to tell you this. I reminded him of the danger to the rest of us, hoping it would change his mind. I shouldn't have done that. I just..." Ron trailed off; Harry didn't know whether he couldn't think of what to say next, or was just reluctant. Dumbledore finished it for him.

"You reacted emotionally; you were desperate to keep him from being exposed to any risk not absolutely necessary. I understand, Ron," said Dumbledore gently. "I

have been through this sort of thing before, and I know how you feel. As I have said before, it is only with the greatest reluctance that I put Harry at risk for the sake of principles. I fully understand why you cannot bear to subject Harry to this sort of risk for the reasons I have."

He was silent again for a few moments. "Severus... had you not conducted your search, what are the chances that Harry would still be alive?"

"Zero, Headmaster," said Snape simply.

Harry could easily believe that. Dumbledore considered further. Finally he said gravely, "Severus, after Easter vacation, you have my permission to conduct such searches as you consider necessary."

Harry and his friends gaped at each other; this was the last thing Harry had expected. Snape raised an eyebrow. "Very well, Headmaster," he replied.

Dumbledore regarded Harry, Ron, and Pansy. "You wish to ask me why I did that," he observed. They nodded. "I am a leader, but not a dictator," he explained. "I cannot lead where others are not willing, or able, to follow. I do not need to ask Professor Snape to know that he was extremely reluctant to violate my trust, and did it out of what he felt was the most dire necessity. You three badly wish to be able to agree with me in this matter, but you cannot. I must recognize that there is nothing more you can do. I should have recognized that you would feel as strongly as you do, and not asked of you what I have."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Harry sadly. "We should be stronger-"

He stopped as Dumbledore shook his head. "I am not infallible, Harry, as you have already seen. This issue is most definitely not a black and white one; it would be foolish to say that setting aside principles for reasons of necessity is never justified. It is a matter of judgment, and people of good conscience can differ. I feel so strongly about it because it is my judgment that the first step down the slippery slope is the easiest, the most defensible... and the most dangerous. But I can respect other opinions."

"I don't think it's so much a matter of opinion, sir," said Pansy. "In principle, I agree with your opinion. I hate to take that first step, I really do. I know the possible consequences. Maybe I'm just falling into the same trap that so many people have, and it'll just be one more chapter of folly in a history book. I know the right thing to do, I just couldn't do it."

Dumbledore shook his head again. "It is not that simple, Pansy. You have heard about instances in history where the thin end of the wedge widened quickly and disastrously, but you do not usually hear about instances where the wedge did not widen and did no further damage. Nobody remarks on the dog that did not bark, as it were. It is not totally clear-cut."

"You must have thought it was, sir, to put Harry at risk when it was the last thing you wanted to do," Pansy said.

"That does not mean I am not making an error in judgment. All it means is that I feel very strongly. But Professor Snape has said that Harry would be dead now if not for what he did, and I know we all believe that is true. I cannot be unaffected by that. There is no right and wrong to this, and all your actions indicate to me that I have gone too far in one direction. While a leader cannot follow those he leads, he must also take note of their feelings and incorporate them into his judgment. For example, you may think I will be angry at, or disappointed in, Professor Snape for violating my trust. In fact, I feel remorse that I put him in a position in which he felt he had little choice but to do so. If you ask someone to do something, you must know what you are asking of them. I have made a misjudgment, and I am simply recognizing that.

"There is another aspect to this, as well," added Dumbledore, after another moment's thought. "Harry, you were willing to risk your own safety, though not that of your friends, for the sake of principle. But you were willing to risk both for the sake of not lying to me. I am deeply touched by this, by the trust you place in me even though you do not agree with my judgment. To be worthy of that trust, I must give you reason to know that your trust will not be misplaced. I do so by giving your feelings and opinions their due consideration."

Harry didn't know what to say. "Thank you, sir." He again hoped that he might someday become the sort of person Dumbledore was.

"You are welcome, Harry. Is there anything else I can do for you?" Harry and the others shook their heads and prepared to leave, but they stopped when Snape spoke.

"Professor Potter, Miss Parkinson... and you, Mr. Weasley, and your friends... Mr. Malfoy's items were found easily, because he did not expect his belongings to be searched. After Easter, he will expect it, and take measures. There are magical ways to secrete items in such a way as to make them unfindable even by one who knows what he is looking for. You must all be on a high state of alert at that time. He can be expected to act shortly after vacation, for he will fear that his items may be found no matter how well he hides them."

"Believe me, sir, we'll be as ready as we can be," said Pansy fervently, as Harry and Ron nodded. They turned to leave, Ron and Pansy adding their thanks to Dumbledore.

Harry and Ron had another fly just before dinner. They couldn't fly over the pitch because Ravenclaw was having a practice, but they came near a few times as

they raced. A few Ravenclaws interrupted their practice to wave them over for a chat, and to check out Ron's Firebolt.

"Really nice," said Terry Boot, examining what he could as Ron was sitting on it, hovering. "But what are you going to do with it as a Keeper?"

Ron shrugged. "I probably shouldn't tell you this, but for Quidditch I'm going to let Ginny use it, for practice and games."

A few Ravenclaws shook their heads in annoyance, as Cho came over and joined them. "What, Harry having a Firebolt against Cho's Shooting Star wasn't good enough for you?" complained Michael Corner.

"I didn't get it for him so we could win at Quidditch," protested Harry. "I would have done it even if we couldn't use it for Quidditch."

Boot nodded. "You can't question his word, Michael. He's a phoenix companion, after all."

Harry and Ron chuckled, as did all the Ravenclaws except Corner. "Thanks, Terry. Oh, and thanks to all you Ravenclaws for sticking up for me in class earlier. I appreciate it."

Boot shook his head. "I just wish Malfoy would leave, he's such a creep."

"I'm afraid he's not going anywhere until he's got a knife in Harry's back, or has done his best to do that," said Ron unhappily.

"If we're anywhere around, he'll have to get through us to do it," said Cho fiercely. "I know the Diffusion Shield too, you know."

Harry felt a wave of emotion at this show of support. "Thanks, Cho... I really appreciate that." Ron nodded his agreement.

"Well, you'd better let us get on with our practice," said Boot. "Clearly, we're going to need as much as we can get."

Harry felt a bit guilty. "Okay, see you later," he said, and he and Ron flew off. As they flew out of the Ravenclaws' hearing range, Ron said, "You don't feel guilty about having better equipment, do you? I mean, we've beaten the Slytherins every time despite their brooms. You have to have good people on the brooms, Harry. You're good, and so is Ginny. If we win, it'll be because we deserve it."

Harry nodded, not wanting to argue with Ron, but he knew the brooms could make the difference in a close match. He reflected that often life was not fair; it just happened to be unfair in their favor this time.

After dinner, Harry and the others went back to Gryffindor Tower. He practiced dueling with Neville for an hour, then they turned their attention to teaching the others. Ron and Hermione were getting better at real dueling, as was Ginny, though she was behind the others, not having had Dumbledore's lessons on

dueling. After explaining one of the ideas he and Neville learned from the Aurors, Harry heard a voice behind him saying, "I see that teaching four hours a day is not enough for you, Professor." He turned to see McGonagall regarding him with amusement.

"Professor!" Harry said, surprised. McGonagall's appearances in the Gryffindor common room were rare. "Did you want to talk to me?"

Her manner was that of one delivering bad news. "You have visitors, Professor. Two people from the Ministry of Magic, including Minister Fudge, wish to speak to you."

Harry shook his head and swore mildly. "I do hope that you will be more diplomatic than that," she said, almost smiling.

"I wouldn't bet on it," said Harry. "You know this isn't exactly my strong suit."

She nodded sympathetically. "I'm afraid that this is the time to take Professor Snape's advice."

He reluctantly agreed. "Neville, could you finish this up?" Neville nodded.

Hermione stepped up. "Remember Harry, don't agree to anything until you've had some time to think about it, and be careful what you say that they could misrepresent later. Also, be sure you don't-"

"Would you like to come, Miss Granger?" interrupted McGonagall. "You could wear his Invisibility Cloak, sit next to him, and whisper."

Harry laughed, and Hermione smiled. "I really would, Professor. Okay, Harry, go on."

"It should make you feel better to know that Professor Dumbledore will be there with him," said McGonagall to Hermione.

"It makes me feel better, that's for sure," said Harry. "All right, I'm ready."

They left Gryffindor Tower and headed for Dumbledore's office, which Harry was glad to know would be the setting; he tended to feel comfortable there. They went past the gargoyles and knocked on the door, which opened. "Ah, thank you, Minerva. Harry, please come in. You know Minister Fudge, of course." Harry politely shook hands with Fudge, who seemed to be putting on his friendly-uncle manner. Harry had seen this before and believed that to be what Fudge was like, but here, he knew it was nothing more than a mask. The real Fudge, he felt, was the one he had seen trying to railroad him at the disciplinary hearing a year and a half ago.

"And this gentleman," continued Dumbledore, gesturing to the man Harry had never met, "is Archibald Dentus, a former high-level Ministry official."

Dentus extended his hand. He was older, Harry guessed he was in his sixties, with short gray hair and a trimmed beard. He smiled as he shook Harry's hand. "It's good to meet you, Professor," he said. "Professor Dumbledore has told me about you."

Harry looked at Dumbledore in mild surprise. "Archibald is an old friend, Harry," he said. "He and I have been known to differ, but I have always respected him and his views."

Dentus grinned. "Well, I suppose that amounts to an endorsement, under the circumstances." They sat down, and Fudge spoke.

"Firstly, Harry, I, and the Ministry, would like to express our regret for what happened last year..." He was going to continue, but Harry didn't feel Fudge was sincere, so he decided to be aggressive, even if it was the wrong thing to do.

"I'm sorry, Minister, but do you mean for not believing that Voldemort was back, or for the abuse I took in the Prophet?"

Small grins crossed the faces of Dentus and Dumbledore; Fudge looked flustered. "Well, there was some unpleasantness, that's true, but I am hoping we can--"

"'Unpleasantness', Minister?" Harry asked, trying to keep his emotions out of his voice, and not doing very well. "I don't think you would just call it 'unpleasant' if you knew, like I did, that Voldemort was back and that nothing was being done about it, that in fact there were many people trying to make sure nothing was done about it. He's had a whole extra year to prepare. Maybe if that hadn't happened, he wouldn't have so much spare time to try to kill me."

Fudge looked like he was simultaneously abashed and trying not to be angry. "Harry, we had to have proof of his return. With no impetus from us, the Prophet had already printed articles that suggested that you were... not quite right. I realize now that they were incorrect, of course, but you must understand, nobody would have believed you, and there could have been a panic. The rational thing to do was to try to keep emotions down. As I was starting to say earlier, I regret what was done. I wish that we had acted differently."

Harry still didn't believe it, but at least it sounded more genuine, and he decided to accept it for now. "I understand, Minister. But please don't use words like 'unpleasantness.' I'd really rather you called it what it was."

Dumbledore put in, "You must understand, Cornelius, that Harry is sixteen years old and not well versed in political nuance. Words such as 'unpleasantness' or 'regret' will be interpreted correctly by those versed in politics, but to Harry, it sounds as though you are trivializing what he has been through, which I assure you is a great deal. If you can discard the political language and speak more directly and plainly, I think Harry will be more receptive to what you have to say."

Fudge nodded, trying to keep his impatience down. "I'll try, Dumbledore. Harry, what happened last year was unfair and wrong, and I'm sorry about it."

Harry almost smiled, and nodded. "That, I can understand. Thank you. I want you to know, Minister, that I don't hold a grudge against the Ministry. I know the Ministry represents the people, and I want to do what I can to help people fight Voldemort."

Fudge smiled, and Harry tried to repress the instinct that he'd done something wrong. "Excellent, Harry, thank you. We may have been late, but that's what we're trying to do now, and we're pleased to know that you want to help. And that's why Undersecretary Dentus is here. What he's going to tell you about is something he believes is necessary to fight... Voldemort, which we know you want as well." Harry noted that Fudge was not comfortable saying the name, but at least he made the effort.

"Excuse me, Minister, I thought Professor Dumbledore said he used to work for the Ministry, but not anymore."

"It is a common practice, Harry, for high-level officials who are retired to still be referred to by their titles afterwards," Dumbledore explained.

"An affectation, but it makes us feel better," joked Dentus. "You should know, Harry, that I left the Ministry in July two years ago, shortly after Voldemort came back. I know Albus, and I knew that if he said Voldemort was back, then he was back. I quit my position in protest of the Ministry's policies. I don't work for the Ministry, but now that the Ministry is on board, I want to do what I can to help them."

Harry nodded, but said nothing. He had a fairly favorable reaction to Dentus, spurred mainly by Dumbledore's recommendation. Dentus also seemed more genuine, and didn't talk or act like a politician.

"I'm working with the Ministry, Harry," continued Dentus, "to try to increase security for all wizards during this dangerous time. And none are better equipped than you to understand just how dangerous it is."

Harry smiled a bit. "I try to take the fact that Voldemort wants me dead so badly as an indication that what I'm doing is right."

Dentus chuckled. "That's a good attitude, Harry, but you'll have to excuse me if I don't wait for an attempt on my life as confirmation that what I'm doing is a good idea."

"No, I didn't mean to say that that was the only way to know," said Harry. "Anyway, just what is it that you want to do?"

"The idea I support, Harry, and many prominent wizards do as well, has to do with the regulation of Apparation. You are of course aware that wizards must be licensed to Apparate, as the Ministry gave you special dispensation to Apparate early. You are also aware that the Ministry has methods of detecting various kinds of

magic, including Apparation, wherever they occur." Harry nodded, wondering where this was going.

"There have now been three attacks on Muggles in the past three weeks, and of course the attack that killed two wizards last Tuesday. These signal the beginning of a new terror offensive by Voldemort, one that could severely disrupt our society. We want to do what we can to make it more difficult for Voldemort and his Death Eaters to conduct these attacks, and to get away after they do so. As I mentioned, we can detect Apparation, but since anyone licensed can Apparate freely, this ability helps us little when it comes to catching attacking Death Eaters. Aurors cannot arrive on the scene until there has been a report, and by that time, usually people are dead, and the perpetrators Disapparated.

"What will vastly help our security efforts, Harry, is to temporarily suspend Apparation privileges for all but specifically authorized people, such as Aurors." Harry's eyebrows shot up; he imagined Muggles being told they could not drive. Dentus noticed his expression. "I know it seems like a lot, Harry, but think about it. Most wizards do not, strictly speaking, need to Apparate to get around. It's convenient, but there are fireplaces everywhere wizards normally go, and there are always brooms for the rare areas in which there are no public fireplaces, not to mention Portkeys if need be, and the Knight Bus. What would be asked of the public would be nothing worse than enduring a small inconvenience. Against that, think of what would be gained. If no one but Death Eaters were Apparating, Aurors would not have to wait for a report of an attack to respond. Ministry magic observers would detect an Apparation and alert Aurors, who would be on the scene instantly-probably soon enough to save lives, and perhaps in time to catch Death Eaters."

"Wouldn't they just stop Apparating, and use other types of transportation?" Harry wondered.

"Yes, they would," agreed Dentus, "and that would mean that we would have taken a powerful weapon away from them. They would not be able to use fireplaces, because those can be monitored. They could use Portkeys, but those have to be arranged at both ends, so they would have to set one up in advance before it could be used as a means of attack or escape. We have thoroughly analyzed the possibilities, Harry. The best the Death Eaters could do would be either to fly to the scene of an attack on a broom, or set up a Portkey in a specific location prior to an attack. Then they could escape by the Portkey, or if they flew to the site on a broom, they could escape by Disapparating, then taking a Portkey from the Apparation point to their base. It would not stop attacks; people would still be killed. Nobody claims this will solve everything. But it would slow them down, make them have to work harder to conduct attacks. It would take them extra time to reach their destinations and to

prepare their getaways. It would deter casual attacks; Death Eaters wouldn't decide on a whim to go kill some people, because of the risk of being caught if they have not made preparations. Overall, it is hard not to believe that some lives would be saved. That seems more than worth the temporary inconvenience of people being unable to casually Apparate. But I'd like to know what you think of this."

Harry thought for a solid minute, in silence. He could, so far, find nothing wrong with it, and he could see that in a way, it made perfect sense. It would indeed take a weapon away from Death Eaters. He wondered about the arguments against it, and except for the obvious one, he could not think of any. "Mr. Dentus," Harry asked, "it seems like you know this issue very well, and you must know the arguments against it. If you had to argue against it, what would you say? Or, what would an opponent of it say if he was sitting here?"

Dentus glanced at Dumbledore. "He may well be," he said humorously. "That's a very good question, Harry. It's exactly what you should ask. He would first point out something I have already admitted, that the plan would not stop attacks. If he were honest, he would not dispute that it would slow them down; he might legitimately differ on how much they would be slowed down. He could argue that it would only slow them down a little, and that would not be worth the difficulty it would cause.

"The most important argument against this idea is one you must have already thought of—the unsettling thought that the government would be telling people what they can and cannot do in their private lives, taking away a privilege to which people have become accustomed. Many will argue that this will be the first of a series of increasingly harsh and restrictive measures, until finally little personal freedom would remain. Once this is done, it could be considered a precedent for taking away other privileges, and then rights as well. As you must know from your History of Magic classes, history tells us that this is a serious concern, not to be taken lightly.

"Other arguments against this are, I feel, not truly serious. Some would say that such personal freedoms such as the right to travel should never be compromised, whatever the reason. But this is not a restriction of the right to travel, just on one particular type of travel. People could still go wherever they wanted by other means, so it is not an infringement on any personal liberties. Honestly, there is nothing else I can think of worth mentioning as an argument against it."

Harry thought it over some more. "Well,—I'm sorry, I have a question. How private is this conversation? Can what I say be told to other people, or quoted? I don't mean any offense," he added quickly, noting Fudge's darkening look. "I just don't know how this sort of thing works."

Amused, Dentus looked at Dumbledore. "Did you suggest he ask that?"

"I had no opportunity to confer with Harry before you arrived, Archibald. I have suggested nothing to him."

"It was Hermione," Harry admitted. Dentus nodded with a small smile.

"Yes, I've read about her in the Prophet. She sounds like someone whose advice should be taken seriously. And it is a good question, if you don't know about this sort of thing. But no, you will not be quoted. The Minister or I may mention anything you say to colleagues, unless you specifically ask that we not do so, but you may assume that you will not be held to account for anything you say."

Harry nodded. "Well, my first impression is that it sounds reasonable. I like the idea of taking Apparation away from them, and I would have no problem giving up the ability to casually Apparate so that this could be done. But I am concerned about the argument you raised. So I'd like to ask the Minister a question, if I could." Fudge blinked; Harry wondered if his attention had wandered. "Minister, earlier today I learned a phrase I hadn't known before: 'the thin end of the wedge.' My question is, if this was done, how much more of this sort of thing do you imagine would be done in the name of stopping Voldemort?"

Fudge swelled with determination and, Harry felt, a little self-importance. "Stopping him is obviously our number one priority, Harry. We will do anything we have to in order to ensure his defeat."

Harry blinked, somewhat alarmed. That hadn't been the answer he'd expected; he thought Fudge would give him bland reassurances that it wouldn't happen. Dentus visibly winced; Dumbledore remained serene.

Harry decided to press a little. "So, you could imagine that other similar measures could become necessary?"

To Dentus's credit, Harry felt, he did not intervene to try to save Fudge from himself. Looking slightly baffled, Fudge said, "Well, I can't think right now of what kind of thing could be necessary. I would recommend something, though, if it made as much sense as this makes. It's a minor loss, and a big gain."

Harry felt it was a reasonable thing to say, but it hadn't really addressed the thrust of his question. Dentus pressed on.

"I can tell you, Harry, that the people have a very strong influence over what the Ministry does. The Ministry cannot do things that are highly unpopular; our system of governance is very good in that way. If unpopular measures started being taken, the people would register their disapproval, and the measures would stop. Our government is capable of great flexibility."

"There is another reason for me to mention what I just did, Harry. This idea is not the most popular thing in the world. The Minister will not benefit politically by suggesting it; in fact, it would be a risk for him. As you no doubt have guessed, we

are here to seek your public support for this. Your accomplishments have created a great reservoir of goodwill among the wizarding public. If you asked people to support this, there are many who would for that reason alone. You could help us make wizarding society safer, and make life harder for Voldemort and his Death Eaters."

"Well," said Harry, "as I said, it makes sense in general to me, except for my concern that I mentioned. Why would it not be popular? If people are concerned like I am, couldn't the Ministry reassure them that they're aware of the danger?"

To Harry's surprise, Dentus chuckled. "I'm sorry, Harry, I don't mean to laugh at you, but your naivety is showing. The reason it will not be popular is not because of the dangers you are concerned about. You assume that everyone will act with the same integrity as you would, and unfortunately, that is wrong. I'm afraid you must get used to the idea that most people are not as noble as you are.

"The problem, Harry, is that many people will react selfishly. They will think only about how the measure affects them. They will think, 'I like Apparating, I don't want to stop, so I'm not going to support it.' Some people won't even listen to the reasons for doing it, never mind giving it long and considered thought. They'll just reject it out of hand. Or, they'll latch onto poor reasons to reject it, as an excuse to indulge their selfishness. I'm not saying a majority will react this way, but a substantial number will, a number high enough to concern the Ministry if they suggest it. You could help reduce that number considerably."

Harry couldn't believe it. How could people behave like that? Didn't they know what was at stake? Incredulous, he looked at Dumbledore. "Is that right, sir? Can that possibly be true?"

Dumbledore looked grave. "I am afraid, Harry, that what he says is quite true. I know it is hard for you to believe, but it is a part of human nature. I believe you need look no further than your Muggle relatives for evidence of this."

Harry could not argue; he had heard enough of Vernon's political opinions to know he would oppose anything like this which affected him personally. Still, this seemed a bit much.

"I'm sorry, Harry," said Dentus seriously. "I feel like I just told you there was no Santa Claus. But those of us involved in politics in any way are long since used to this fact. It tends to limit what we can do which involves asking people to make any sacrifices. Again, that's a big part of why we need you."

Harry didn't know what to say. "Professor Dumbledore, can you think of any arguments for either side that Mr. Dentus hasn't mentioned?"

"No, Harry. He has articulated them all quite thoroughly."

He thought a bit more, then said, "I didn't know people would react like this, that it would be this hard to get people to give up a convenience. It's almost amazing, when I think about that, that I've gotten so many people to say Voldemort's name."

"It is, in fact, Harry," agreed Dentus. "But amazing as what you have done is, there are still many people who will not say his name, and some of those are the ones I am talking about."

One thing Harry did know for sure was that he couldn't give them the answer they wanted, at least not right then. "Look... as I said, my first reaction is positive, but a bit concerned. But I can't give you any kind of answer tonight. I have to think it through just to decide if I support it myself, never mind tell a whole bunch of people that they should do it. I mean, I'm not that comfortable doing that. I did it for the thing about fighting Voldemort, but only because I answered questions for an interview, I wasn't going out of my way to talk to people. I just did what I thought was right."

"I know," said Dentus, his respect clear on his face. "And that is what Minister Fudge is here trying to do. Believe me when I say, for a politician to try to do what is right is often not an easy thing. They tend to get punished for it."

"To be honest, Harry, I'd rather not do this," said Fudge, and Harry found that he believed him. "I'd rather tell people, we'll take care of... Voldemort, you can go on about your lives. But people tell me this would be important, and I can't ignore that. It's not that much we're asking. One Prophet interview is all it would take, we would take it from there."

Harry shook his head. "It's not the trouble that makes me hesitate, Minister. I would do much more to keep people safe. I just need to be comfortable with it first. Like I said, I'm not comfortable with the idea that I should be telling people what to do."

McGonagall opened the office door. "Excuse me, Headmaster, would you step out here for a moment, please?" Raising an eyebrow slightly, Dumbledore excused himself, and got up and left with McGonagall. Harry had the impression that Dumbledore was not often called out of his own office.

"I understand that," said Dentus. "But you must understand the substantial influence you have. Saying Voldemort's name is very hard for many people-harder than giving up Apparating, by far-but you managed to convince many people to do it. It would be a waste of your stature not to use it to help do something like this. I mean, it isn't just Chocolate Frog cards, Harry."

Harry looked defensive. "I didn't ask for that," he said.

Dentus nodded. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply that you did. I get the feeling that you don't even care that much. I just mean that there are rewards to

being famous and honored as you are, and there are also responsibilities. In a way, Harry, I feel bad even asking you for this. You're only sixteen, and can't be expected to have strong opinions on subjects like this, not to mention that you've done far more than your share, carried huge burdens. It's just that, and again nobody knows this better than you, we're in a difficult situation, and anything that can help us save lives-

Dumbledore stepped back into the room. "I'm sorry, Cornelius, Archibald, but we shall have to end this meeting. An emergency has come up, and Harry's presence is required elsewhere."

"What has happened?" asked Dentus.

"I believe you both know that Harry is very close to the Weasley family," said Dumbledore. "He and they both consider him to be a part of their family. A Weasley family emergency has arisen, and Harry must be with them."

Harry felt a surge of dread. Please, he thought, let nothing have happened to Arthur and Molly, or the twins, or-

"There has been an attack outside a restaurant frequented by Ministry wizards, Harry," said Dumbledore solemnly. "Two wizards and a witch were killed by Death Eaters. One of them was Percy Weasley."

Harry was stunned. He didn't say anything, and didn't move. He heard Dumbledore say, "Cornelius, Archibald, I am sorry, but I will need the use of my office. Minerva is fetching the other Weasley children, and she will attend to you after she has returned with them."

Fudge and Dentus nodded, rose, and headed out. As he passed Harry, Dentus said, "I'm sorry, Harry." Harry didn't react. The door closed, and Harry was alone with Dumbledore. Neither spoke. Harry didn't know how long it had been, but the door opened, and Ron and Ginny walked in. They, too, had dread on their faces; McGonagall had clearly not told them, but they knew that the last time Weasleys had been collected like this, their father had almost died.

Dumbledore faced them and told them exactly what he had told Harry. He saw Ron and Ginny react in almost exactly the same way as he had, with stunned looks and almost no visible reaction. Dumbledore was quiet for a moment, then said, "The other family members are being gathered, and a Portkey is being set up at the Weasley residence. You will go there once that is done. Excuse me, I will return when it is ready." He left his office, leaving the three alone.

Harry exchanged looks with the other two; nobody said anything for a moment. Then Ginny said, hesitantly, "Are you two thinking the same thing that I'm thinking? I hope you are, because if you're not, then it means I'm a terrible person."

Ron looked down, then at her. "I think I am. I guess you mean, something like, if it had to be someone in the family..." She nodded, and they both looked at Harry.

"You're a good person, Ginny," Harry said quietly. "When Dumbledore interrupted the meeting with Fudge, he said there was a Weasley family emergency. I knew what it meant. I started thinking, don't let it be your parents, or the twins... and soon, Percy was the only person I hadn't named in my mind, and just as soon as I thought that, Dumbledore said his name. Then I felt somehow responsible, as though I had wished it on him. I know it's stupid."

She nodded. "I feel so guilty for even thinking it, I just can't help it. He was never mean to me, he was just... being Percy..." She started to sob, stepped up to Ron, and hugged him.

Looking extremely somber, he held her. "It's not your fault, Ginny," he said softly. "We can't help what we think." Harry felt that Ron, however, did not look all that comfortable with what he was thinking, either.

Ginny stopped crying and dried her eyes. "Mum's going to be destroyed," she said sadly. "Bad enough for it to happen to any of us, but the one who they had a rift with... it's doubly bad, not only did he die, but they never got a chance to put it together, to make it right."

Ron nodded. "Now I feel bad for saying-thank goodness I never said it to Mum-that I didn't care if Percy rejoined the family. I mean, I meant it, but I didn't think about this happening, how we would feel. I should have, with Voldemort around."

"Percy wasn't deliberately targeted, was he? Because he was a Weasley..." she trailed off. Harry knew she was thinking of their connection to him. He closed his eyes.

"Oh, Harry, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said or thought that," she said. "I was just thinking out loud... I shouldn't do that."

Harry shook his head. "It's okay, Ginny. You're not the only one who's going to wonder. Dumbledore didn't say, and they probably don't know. But I don't think so. Dumbledore said that Voldemort doesn't think to kill family members for that kind of reason. Considering where it happened, I think it was just coincidence that he happened to be a Weasley." I hope to God that's true, he thought fervently.

"We probably shouldn't try to say too much to Mum," she said. "We shouldn't even try to say anything to try to make her feel better, because it's not going to happen. We should hug her, try to do things for her-but she may want to do things herself, too, to be doing something-and just be supportive, but there's just nothing we can say. It's like it was with you last June, Harry. We wanted so badly to do something to help, but we knew we couldn't. You just needed time, and it'll be that

way for Mum, too. Probably quite a bit of time. They say there's nothing worse than losing a child, and I believe it."

Harry nodded, and told them about her experience with the boggart a year and a half ago. "Don't tell her I told you, but this is how bad it is for her."

"I wonder if she'll be mad at us," said Ron. "You know, for not being more willing to take Percy back."

"If she is, she'll take it out on Dad, he was the one most opposed to dealing with Percy," pointed out Ginny.

"Oh, I hope she doesn't do that," said Harry. "It's not like it won't be terrible for him, too. He may regret more than anyone not talking to Percy."

They fell silent for a minute, then Dumbledore entered the room. "The Portkey has been set up," he said. "Security for the Burrow has been arranged. We will not expect you for classes tomorrow. Your classes will be made up next week, Harry, and if you wish, I will send your regrets to the Aurors for Saturday."

"No," Harry said, quickly. He hadn't even thought about it, but he knew what he wanted. "I'll do the Saturday training, as usual. I'm fighting to stop just this sort of thing. I think the Weasleys will understand why I don't want to take a break from it."

Dumbledore nodded. "I thought you might feel that way," he said. "Lastly, Hermione tracked me down just now. She wants you all to know how sorry she is, though she knows you would know anyway. She also gave me this to give to you." He produced Hermione's notebook which she used to communicate with Pansy. "She did not say to whom it should go."

"I'll take it," said Ron, standing nearest to Dumbledore, who handed it to him. Dumbledore gestured to the Portkey. Harry, Ron, and Ginny touched it together, and found themselves in the kitchen at the Burrow. Fawkes materialized, and perched on Harry's shoulder. They could hear Molly crying in the living room, and they headed in.

All the rest of the family was there. Molly was on the sofa, crying on Bill, who was holding her. Arthur was on her other side, Charlie next to him. Fred and George were in chairs near the sofa. Molly saw the three of them enter the room, and still crying, got up and walked to them. She hugged Ron first, then Ginny, then Harry. Her hugs were much stronger than usual, gripping each child as if in thanks that she still had them. Harry guided her back to the sofa, where she sat, now being held by her husband. Harry, Ron, and Ginny pulled up chairs and sat, as Fawkes started singing.

No one said anything for about ten minutes, at which point Molly stopped crying. "It's strange," she said as she blew her nose, "I feel like I could cry all night long, but my body won't let me. It just has to stop at some point."

Harry nodded. "That's how it was for me, after Hogsmeade, when I woke up. I still felt like I wanted to cry, after I don't know how long, but I couldn't."

"You poor dear," she said. "At least I don't have to feel responsible for this. For other things, maybe, but I know he would have died no matter what his situation with us was."

"You weren't responsible for that, Mum," said Fred. "He was. He left us, he made his decision. Don't get me wrong, I feel terrible that he's dead. I feel terrible that we weren't on good terms with him when it happened. But you can't go blaming yourself. You did the best you could, you did more than any of us."

Molly looked like she might cry again. "I raised him," she said. "I praised him, I encouraged his ambition. He embraced it so much, and I was so proud of him. I never stopped to think of the negative side of it."

"Mum, that was him, that wasn't you," argued Ron. "I don't know, but I feel like we're born a certain way, with a certain personality. I mean, look at Fred and George. They've been making jokes for as long as I can remember. Do you think they got that from you? Or Harry, he's got so many good qualities you can't even list them all, he was chosen by a phoenix, for goodness' sake. Do you think he got any of that from his aunt and uncle? We are how we are, and Percy was ambitious. He would have been even if you'd discouraged it, I'm sure. He just... made a wrong choice at some point. There's nothing you could have done about it."

"You're right, of course, Ron," said Harry. "But I know how Molly feels. I blamed myself for Hogsmeade, I guess it's just natural to do that."

Molly reached out to Harry, meaning she wanted him to come over to the sofa. He did, as Bill moved aside, and Harry sat where he had been. Molly pulled Harry into a hug, and then started crying again. Harry just held her, and it was silent again, except for Molly's sobs and Fawkes's song.

After a while, Ron went upstairs, but the rest stayed in the living room, talking at times, silent at others, taking turns comforting Molly. Arthur didn't cry; Harry wondered what he was going through, and how he was dealing with it. At one point, about three hours after they'd arrived at the Burrow, Arthur asked Harry about the meeting with Fudge. "I'd heard at the Ministry that they were going to see you, and about what. Had you finished talking to them when this happened?"

"Almost," said Harry. "I think we were just about finished." Harry then explained to the others what had been discussed, and Arthur asked him what he thought. "It seemed like a good idea," he said. "It would slow them down, and after what happened tonight, it seems like an even better idea. It would make it harder for them to do this kind of thing. I would support it completely if I could trust the

Ministry not to slide down the slippery slope. But I don't trust them at all, so I have to decide just how much I don't trust them, compared to the good this could do. I was going to ask what you and Molly thought. I need advice and help."

"I'm sorry, Harry, but you're not going to get it from me," said Molly, looking angry. "Right now, I'd support the use of the Cruciatus Curse on captured Death Eaters. I don't mean to get information, I mean just to make them suffer. So I'm not a good person to ask right now."

Harry could understand that. "Believe me, Molly, I wasn't going to ask now. I meant, I was going to before this happened."

The hours trickled by. After four in the morning, Charlie Apparated back to his home, saying he'd be back when he got up. Bill stayed, as did the twins, but they fell asleep in their chairs; Harry couldn't help noting that they always seemed to do the same thing, even if it was fall asleep. He and Ginny sat next to Molly on the sofa. At one point, Ginny fell asleep on Harry's shoulder. She awakened when he moved, and went upstairs to the bathroom. When she came back down, she whispered to Harry, "I peeked in at Ron when I passed by on the way back. He's in his room, lights out, but the desk light by his bed on. He's writing to Pansy, that's what he's been doing for the past... what is it, over six hours now."

"How is she doing that?" Harry marveled in a whisper. "She's going to be falling asleep in her classes tomorrow. But it's really good of her."

"I thought so too," she said. "Probably it's good for Ron to talk to someone not that close to the family, so he can be more honest about his feelings. Also, I've written to Pansy in that book, and there's something about it that encourages you to talk about stuff you wouldn't normally. I'd say that's good for Ron too."

Harry nodded in agreement. She whispered, "Now, where was I..." She snuggled against Harry's shoulder as if it were a pillow, trying to get comfortable; he put an arm around her. The physical contact was a comfort to both of them. Harry found himself wondering how much that was true for Arthur and Molly, next to him on the sofa, or if they were too deeply in grief to notice much else.

Harry didn't end up sleeping at all, spending the last few hours of the night talking to Molly, Arthur, Ginny, and Bill, listening to them talk about Percy. Molly had bouts of crying intermittently, during one of which the twins woke up, again together, and stayed awake, joining the conversation. At about six o'clock, Arthur and Molly went up to their bedroom. Harry assumed it was to talk privately; he very much doubted that either one would be sleeping any time soon. Bill went into the kitchen to make some breakfast, and Fred and George sat next to Harry and Ginny on the sofa.

"What's up with Ron?" asked George.

Ginny shrugged. "You could ask him," she said indifferently. Harry was pleased that she didn't want to violate Ron's privacy.

"Nah, he's probably sleeping by now," said George. "We wanted to know what you really thought."

"What do you mean, 'what we really thought?'" asked Harry, but he had a feeling he did know.

"I kind of exaggerated to Mum before, using the word 'terrible,'" explained Fred. "I wish it hadn't happened, and I'm especially sad for Mum, so I'm trying to be nice. But just because Percy's dead doesn't make him a saint or something. It doesn't change what he did. If we're going to mourn him, let's mourn who he really was."

"And that's why I said, we want to know what you two think," added George.

Harry waited for Ginny to go first. "I don't know, but I kind of feel the same as you," she said. "I think Ron does too. We thought about how it would affect Mum before how it affected us. The sad truth is, even before Percy turned his back on us, we hardly had any kind of relationship with him. You know how formal and distant he always was, I feel like he was sort of the black sheep of the family, the answer to the question 'which one of these doesn't belong?' So for me, it was hard to say I knew him so well. I almost feel sadder that I didn't really know who he was inside and I'll never have the chance than anything else. Maybe he would have become a better person later on."

"You're a bit generous, Ginny, but I suppose we can't know you're wrong. Harry, how about you?"

Harry reflexively looked around before answering. "I can't have the same view as you, not being a natural-born member of the family, not spending most of my life around him. What I remember most was that month I spent here before second year, when you broke me out of the Dursleys' with that car." Fred and George exchanged a grin at the memory. "Everyone in the family made me feel at home, except him..."

"Not me," Ginny interrupted. "I must have made you feel like, what in the world is wrong with her?" Harry smiled, as did the twins.

"Not that he was nasty or anything," Harry continued. "But you know what I mean, he couldn't be natural like everyone else. He never let you see beneath the mask."

"What's a bit scary is that we think the mask was all there was," said Fred.

"No way," said Ginny. "There was a person there somewhere, with feelings, fantasies, whatever makes us who we are. We did get glimpses occasionally."

"That's true, remember the first time we won the Quidditch Cup? He was going crazy just like everyone else," recalled Harry. "I think that was the only time I saw it, though."

"But how do you feel, Harry?" asked George.

Harry looked at the twins with an expression that suggested that he didn't want to answer the question. They exchanged a glance. "That's what we thought," said Fred.

"I'm sad that he's dead," Harry clarified, "but it's as if it happened to a stranger. What makes me really sad is how it affects your parents."

"Us too, Harry," agreed Fred. "And part of me is mad at Percy for making this worse for them than it otherwise would be. If it had been one of us, it would have just been grief. But with him, it's that and the unresolved conflict."

"And the feeling that he rejected them," added George.

Ginny looked impressed. "I didn't know you could be so sensitive."

"We admit, humor is our mask," said Fred. "But at least it's a much nicer mask than Percy's. And we know it's a mask, and we can take it off if we want to. For example, Ginny, I want you to know that if it had been you, we would have been crying right along with Mum." Ginny gratefully threw her arms around Fred. George added, "And that's true for you, too, Harry."

Harry smiled sadly. "I know, and thank you. And it's the same for me with you, of course," he said, as Ginny now hugged George.

"We really appreciated what you said in the Prophet about us," said Fred. "About us looking out for you. We just sort of did it, we weren't that conscious about it. You just seemed like the kind of person we should want to help. But it seems that's not an uncommon feeling." He reached over to pet Fawkes, who was perched on the back of the sofa.

"And if it means we pounded a few Slytherins with our Bludgers, or our bats, then it's all the better," added George.

"Speaking of Fawkes, the sixth years had their phoenix lessons today," said Ginny, now smiling. "I heard all about it, both the Ravenclaw/Slytherin lesson and the Gryffindor/Hufflepuff one." She spent the next five minutes telling Fred and George the details she'd heard, their laughter punctuating her story. They tried to keep their laughter down, though, not wanting to offend their parents. "So," she went on, nearing the conclusion, "the Ravensclaws had heard about the Firebolt, so they started asking Hagrid-"

"What do you mean, 'heard about the Firebolt?'" interrupted Fred.

"Everyone knows Harry has a Firebolt," added George.

Harry and Ginny exchanged surprised looks. "They don't know?" he asked. She gestured for him to go ahead and tell them. "Well, yesterday was Ron's birthday, as you know. I got him a Firebolt."

Harry enjoyed the expressions on the twins' faces. They were speechless for a moment. Finally, Fred said, "Harry, I think it is safe to say that you are one of a kind."

"Ron must've been over the moon," mused George.

"He was pretty happy," agreed Ginny. "But he's going to let me use it for Quidditch practice and games, since he's a Keeper."

They raised their eyebrows. "Practical, yet generous," said George.

"You'll take the Cup for sure now, even if Harry takes longer than twelve seconds to get the Snitch," said Fred.

They talked about Quidditch and the Firebolt for a while, and the twins asked more about the Care of Magical Creatures lessons, which Harry reluctantly described, to the twins' great amusement. Soon thereafter, Bill came in and said, "There's breakfast for anyone who wants it. Is Ron up?"

"I'll go check," said Harry. He knew that even if Ron was still talking to Pansy, he couldn't continue for long, as it would not be long before she would have to go to the Great Hall for breakfast. He walked up the stairs quietly so as not to disturb anyone who might be sleeping.

He silently walked into Ron's bedroom. Ron was sprawled out on the bed, asleep, obviously not having intended to fall asleep in that position. The notebook and pen were near his hand. Harry picked them up, and saw writing on the left side of the book. He saw the words, "Ron? Ron?"

He sat down and wrote, "Are you still there, Pansy?"

The reply came back almost immediately. "Yes, is that you, Ron? The handwriting looks different."

"No, it's me, Harry. I came up to see if Ron wanted breakfast, and he had fallen asleep while writing. None of us have really slept here."

"I can imagine. I was going to have to go for breakfast in a bit, I'm glad you let me know what had happened. He hadn't answered for a few minutes."

"It was really nice of you to do this. You gave up a whole night's sleep."

"I don't mind at all, as I told him three times. He kept asking me if I was sure I didn't want to go to bed. It was great. It was an amazing talk. He really opened up, told me all kinds of stuff. Like you do, but I didn't expect it of him."

"I'm really glad. I'm sure he needed it. You were there for him, like you were there for me after Hogsmeade."

"(blush) Thank you, Harry. How are you doing?"

"Tired, but mostly okay. I'm sure Ron told you, we're mostly sad for Molly and Arthur. It's like, we really feel bad that we don't feel really bad."

"Yes, Ron told me. I remember Percy a little, what he was like. Ron told me he hardly knew him better than I did. That's so sad."

"Yes, Ginny and I and the twins were talking about it downstairs. Molly and Arthur went to their room an hour ago, and we've been talking since then. They feel the same way. By the way, are you going to be okay today? Malfoy's going to notice there's something wrong."

"Don't worry. If I'm really bad, I'll skive off a class or two. I think I'll be okay, though. As for Malfoy, if he notices anything, I'll just hint that it's my time of the month. He won't ask any more questions."

"(laugh) I'll bet. You must have been really surprised to open up the notebook last night and find out it was Ron."

"Yes, I was amazed at first. I hadn't heard about Percy, he told me how he got it. That was so thoughtful of Hermione."

"Yes, it was. It's the kind of thing I've come to expect from her."

"I know what you mean. Look, before I go, I wanted to say, in case he doesn't... he feels awful about what he said earlier. He brought it up twice, said he really wished he could take it back. I just wanted to make sure you knew that."

"I know, but I'm not bothered anymore. Part of me feels like I deserved it, like I needed to be reminded that I need to look at that kind of decision thinking about how it affects the rest of you, not only me. I mean, I dragged the rest of you into this campaign."

"You didn't drag us, we decided to come. Hermione would give you a long lecture about it, but I'm afraid I don't have time, I have to go to breakfast soon. But she was right. You just do what you think is right, let us worry about the rest. And you did not, repeat not, deserve it. I would feel the same way as him if I had said it. But if you think about it, what it really means is that he cares about you so much that he'd go to any length to keep you safe."

"I know, maybe that's also part of the reason I'm not mad at him. Now I feel like I'm just lucky to have him, to have all of you."

"I'm glad, Harry, and I'm proud to be included in that. But I'm afraid I have to go, I'll miss breakfast if I don't go soon. I'll be thinking of you today, all of you."

"I know, Pansy, and thank you. You're a very good friend."

"You too, Harry. See you later."

"Bye," Harry wrote, and closed the book. He put it and the pen on the desk near Ron's bed, and headed back downstairs. He joined the others. "He's asleep."

The twins raised their eyebrows. "Your powers of observation are slipping, Harry, if it took you five minutes to determine that," smiled Fred.

"Just a few things I wanted to do before eating," said Harry. The twins resumed their conversation with Bill, and Harry and Ginny exchanged a significant look. He was sure Ginny knew what he had been doing.

Friday went by in a kind of haze for Harry, even though he did catch two hours of sleep in the early afternoon. Quite a few people were in and out of the Weasleys' fireplace, as friends and Arthur's colleagues came by to pay their respects. Tonks and Kingsley came by, and Harry told them he would be there the next day as usual. They were surprised, but understood his reasons, as did Arthur and Molly.

At around five-thirty, Harry was lying in the extra bed in Ron's room, but not sleeping. Ron came in; it was the first time they'd spoken privately since last night.

"Are you sleeping, or hiding?" Ron asked.

"Hiding," Harry replied. "I did greet some people with your mother earlier, but this is one of those times that it's not so good to be Harry Potter. Everybody has something to say to me. It's always positive, of course, I'm not complaining, it's just... kind of draining. So I'm hiding. How about you?"

"I don't get the Harry Potter treatment, but it's the usual stuff. We're so sorry about your brother, like that. I feel like I should pretend I'm sadder than I really am. And like you say, that's draining too."

Sitting up, Harry nodded his understanding. "How do you feel now?"

Ron thought a moment. "About the same, I guess. Sometimes it's hard to know what to think, since there's such a difference in the relationship we had-being brothers-and our actual relationship, which, well, there almost wasn't one. That's what makes this kind of hard."

"I'm glad you were able to talk to Pansy. I'm sure it helped."

Ron raised his eyebrows. "Were you the one who-"

"Yes, I came up to tell you about breakfast, and you had fallen asleep. She was still there, so I picked up the notebook and let her know what had happened. We talked for a few minutes, and then she had to go to breakfast."

Ron looked a little nervous, but it seemed to go away quickly. "Good. I felt bad for falling asleep when I woke up. Did she tell you what we talked about?"

"No, no details. Just that you opened up, but I could have guessed that. You weren't up here for seven or eight hours writing about nothing."

"Guess that makes sense," Ron allowed. "It really helped. It was... very good of her to talk for that long. I mean, I wasn't going to be going to sleep anyway. She was, but she still stayed up."

"I know her well enough now to not be surprised, but yes, I told her that I thought it was really good of her too. She said she was happy to do it, and I could tell that she was, she said it was a 'great' conversation. Let me ask you, when Hermione gave us the book, do you think she had one of us in mind?"

"I asked her that, and she said she didn't think so, just that Hermione must have thought that one of us would need it more than she would. I was glad to talk to her, because... downstairs, we couldn't really talk. I did feel kind of bad about leaving, but I figured there were more than enough people, they wouldn't notice one missing."

"I don't think they did, really," agreed Harry. "Nobody mentioned it, anyway."

"I don't want them to think I don't care," said Ron. "There just wasn't much I could do, anyway." He sat down on his bed, thinking. "This is so strange. I still don't know what I should be thinking. I mean, Pansy said there's nothing I should be thinking, that I think what I think. I'm sure she's right-after all, I said something similar to Ginny-but I still feel this way."

"I know what you mean. I could be wrong-and I feel that way too-but maybe it's because we don't feel how we're 'supposed' to feel, so it's as if we don't trust our actual feelings, but we just question them. We can't say them, except to each other. We can't tell anyone who we think might tell others."

Ron nodded. "I think she actually said something like that... it's almost hard to remember, we talked so long. Anyway, I guess we're stuck with it. Have you talked about it with Ginny and the twins?"

"After your parents went to bed, at about six, we all talked, and we all felt pretty much the same way. By the way, the twins asked about you. Ginny knew what you were doing, but she acted like she didn't."

Ron chuckled. "She wants to encourage me, I'm sure. Doesn't want them making fun of me for something like this. I don't think they would, not at a time like this, but she's just being careful. The fact is, though, I'm pretty well beyond caring if they make fun of me or not."

"I think she's just respecting your privacy, is the main thing. I mean, she told me, of course, but that's different."

They were silent for a moment. Then Ron sighed. "Poor Mum and Dad... they didn't deserve this. You know... and I told Pansy this... I'm kind of mad at Percy for leaving it this way, because it just makes it harder for them."

"Fred and George said the same thing," said Harry. "I bet your father feels that way too, but he'd never say it to anyone. This has to have been so hard for him... and what makes it worse is that everybody at the Ministry knew what was going on,

and now everybody will look at him when he goes back and know exactly what he's been through. So if I'm mad at Percy for anything, it's what he did to your father."

"And we're not supposed to be mad at people who just died," said Ron. "But we are anyway. And you know what else..." Ron looked as if he both wanted to and didn't want to say something. "This is really terrible... and I told Pansy this too, but... there's a little part of me that's unhappy that this happened on my birthday. Not because it messed up my day or anything, but there'll always be this... association. It'll always be my birthday, and the day Percy died. And I didn't even like him." He looked at Harry, obviously feeling very guilty. "That's awful, isn't it?"

Harry's heart went out to Ron. He shook his head. "That's how you feel, Ron. We can't only have the kind of feelings we're proud of. We're human, we have all of them. I guess we just have to recognize them and accept them."

"I suppose so... I guess I just have to live with it, with myself. Maybe it'll make me a better person, who knows."

"You're already a good person, Ron. I should know, and you should trust my judgment. I was chosen by a phoenix, after all." Ron chuckled, then Harry did too.

"I thought that just meant that you were a good person," Ron said.

"Yes, but if you're my friend, then that says something about you, too," Harry said, half-seriously.

"Ah, it's goodness through association," Ron surmised. He got up from his bed, walked to the center of the room, and gave Harry a look. Not sure if he was understanding it correctly, Harry slowly got up, and took a step toward Ron. Ron reached out to Harry and pulled him into an embrace. "Thank you, Harry," Ron said. He didn't say for what, but Harry understood.

"Any time, Ron," he said. "You've been there for me, lots of times." A few seconds later, Harry said, "Where's Malfoy when you need him?" They both laughed, and slowly broke the embrace.

"So, are you ready to come out of hiding and come with me downstairs? A few of Mum's friends are down there, they're doing some cooking. Dinner should be pretty soon."

"All right, let's go," Harry agreed. He followed Ron downstairs, feeling a little better than he had all day.

Exhaustion having caught up with them, no one in the Weasley family went to sleep that night later than nine o'clock. Harry went downstairs after waking up Saturday morning and gave Molly, who was cooking breakfast, a long hug. He found himself wondering if she could detect their ambivalent feelings about Percy, and if she would ask.

Breakfast was eaten in relative silence. Fred and George were still there; they had decided that they would open the shop, and each would do a half-day while the other stayed at the Burrow. Harry told them he felt a little bad for going, and they all admonished him not to. "If you end up catching the scum who did this, Harry, I'll be very happy," said Molly. Then she paused, and said, "Well, maybe not happy. I can't imagine being happy right now. I would be satisfied."

The Aurors greeted Harry somberly, as did Neville; they all gave him their condolences, and a few said things showing they understood the unusual situation the Weasleys were in. They had their normal morning training, and broke for lunch shortly after noon. As they sat down, Tonks said, "So, Harry, we heard you met with Fudge. How did it go?"

"I was just going to ask that," said Neville. "What did they want?"

Harry answered, and explained the issue a bit for Neville's benefit; he knew the Aurors would be well versed in it. "So," he concluded, "I can see it's a good idea and will be helpful. But I don't trust the Ministry not to abuse any power I help them get. So I'm still not sure what I'm going to do. I want to know what people have to say about it, and of course, I wanted to ask all of you. So tell me what you think."

"Well, Harry," answered Kingsley, "It's safe to say we support the idea; I don't think there's a single one of us who doesn't. It would affect us most directly, and most favorably. As you know, and not to be overly dramatic, but we're the ones who put our lives on the line every time we Apparate out to the scene of a situation. Anything we can do to slow them down is a big plus. It's true that this won't stop attacks, but Dentus is right, it'll deter casual ones. Every less situation we have to Apparate into on no notice is one less where innocent people die, one less where one of us might be killed. To us, this is a no-brainer."

"And you're not worried about the possibility of it leading to worse things?" Harry asked.

"The problem is, Harry," said Tonks, "is that it's like saying you should never have a drop of alcohol, because you might become an alcoholic, or you should never gamble even once, because you might become a compulsive gambler." She paused and grinned at her colleagues. "You can't take absolute positions, not in real life. There are always balances to be weighed, and in this case, there's no contest. People really don't need to Apparate. We really need to slow down Voldemort. It's pretty simple."

"But Harry is right, the Ministry can't be trusted," said Jack. "Who knows what they'll do next, Harry said Fudge nearly admitted as much. And we all know how Fudge is, he'd do anything that was popular at the time."

"Yes, but he's doing this, and it's not popular," pointed out Kingsley. "We should encourage it by giving him support in doing something unpopular. The only

reason we haven't supported it publicly yet is that he hasn't proposed it. When you read the article in which it's announced, you'll see the phrase 'the full support of the Auror community.'"

"In that case," countered Jack, "the 'Auror community' had better keep our eyes on what they do after that, because then it gets easier. What if the next thing is intercepting owls, or even searching people's homes? We may not be in favor of that, but another politically important group could be. If we support this, we're obligated to be vigilant, to make sure it doesn't get worse."

Harry looked confused. "I thought you said that all the Aurors supported it," he said to Kingsley.

Jack answered. "I do, Harry. I just take it upon myself to be the local contrarian. I take the opposite side of an issue if no one else will, just for practice. But I do believe what I say. We can't just give the Ministry support, then close our eyes."

"Jack has a good point, of course," agreed Kingsley. "And we will keep an eye on things. One thing about Aurors, we always keep an ear to the ground politically, we kind of have to."

"Do you think the whole Auror community appreciates the danger?" asked Harry.

Tonks shrugged. "You don't have to have an O.W.L. in History of Magic to be an Auror, but most of us are pretty well educated. I'd say we have a better-than-average understanding of the issues here."

"Look, Harry, we don't want to pressure you," Kingsley assured him. "You're only sixteen, you're not experienced at this sort of thing. Coming out in favor of this, though we want it, isn't something we would have asked of you. It's not going to affect your relationship with us if you don't do it. You should do what you're comfortable with."

"No, no, you're not pressuring me," said Harry. "I wanted to know what you thought, and if you have a strong opinion about it, then I take that very seriously. As you say, you're the ones who this affects most strongly. That matters to me."

"Thank you, Harry," said Tonks. "We like you too." Most everyone at the table chuckled.

Neville spoke up. "What does Professor Dumbledore think, Harry?"

"I don't know. He didn't give an opinion at the meeting, and I didn't have a chance to ask him afterwards, because the Percy thing happened right after that. I'm going to ask him when I get back to Hogwarts."

"Ten Galleons says he opposes it," offered Tonks.

The other Aurors at the table chuckled. "Don't think you'll find any takers, Tonks, even if you give odds," said Temble.

"Five to one?" she suggested. The others shook their heads. "You'd have to go to twenty to one before I'd even think about it," said Kingsley.

Harry was confused. "I'm sorry, I don't know much about odds. Does this mean that you all think he's going to oppose it?"

"Yes, Harry, that's what we think," said Kingsley. "Don't get us wrong, we have tremendous respect for Professor Dumbledore. He's a great man, no question. But he's known as an absolutist when it comes to this kind of thing. He would sacrifice lives for principle. I can respect that attitude, but I can't agree with it, and most people don't, either. Most of us feel, as Tonks said, that there should be a balance."

"Is that why," asked Neville, "he doesn't throw Malfoy out of Hogwarts even though it's obvious he's going to try to kill Harry at some point?"

Harry was startled; it wasn't like Neville to be so outspoken, never mind in opposition to Dumbledore. Seeing Harry's expression, Neville continued, "I've talked about this with Hermione, Harry. She feels strongly about principle, she's closer to him on this than I am. But even she would throw him out, even without a reason."

"You seem not to need an answer to your question, Neville, but yes, that's why," replied Kingsley. "Needless to say, any of us would have thrown Malfoy out by now."

"I would've used the Confundus Beam as an excuse," said Tonks. "And it wouldn't even be that thin an excuse. Use of a potentially debilitating weapon against a Hogwarts teacher?"

"When it happened," Harry explained, "he said that it couldn't be considered an assault on a teacher, because it happened on the Quidditch pitch, where since I play for Gryffindor I can't be considered a teacher."

This was greeted by a few snorts and a general shaking of heads. "Technically, he's right," conceded Kingsley. "But most of us live in the real world, where people suffer and die because bad guys aren't dealt with properly. He feels so strongly about this that he's willing to risk your life over it, important as you are."

"Do you guys know how he feels about me?" asked Harry, curious.

Kingsley nodded. "My understanding is that he loves you like a son, which makes his actions all the more impressive. No one's questioning his sincerity, Harry. We know he would prefer to risk himself over these principles rather than you. And who knows, maybe at the end of the day he's right. Maybe if everyone stuck so closely to principle, fewer lives would be lost in the long run. Or you could argue that even if that's not true, principles are still worth dying for. That gets into values, and even

mysticism. Maybe spiritually, dying for principle is particularly noble, and you get extra credit in the afterlife, if there is one. Any of that could be true. Also, there's the man himself, his greatness is just self-evident. I assume you feel the same way about him?" Harry nodded. "So if I were you, I might also let him risk my life over principle, just because if it meant that much to him, I'd want to honor that. It's just that most people wouldn't do what he's doing."

"Most people don't have a phoenix, either, Kingsley," pointed out Jack. "You know what it means to be chosen by a phoenix. Don't you think that maybe we should listen to him a bit more carefully, with that in mind?"

Kingsley shook his head. "I already factored that in, Jack. I said he was a great man, and Fawkes is reflected in that. But even a great man can be wrong on any given issue, and he's the first to say he's not perfect."

"Harry," asked Neville, "suppose you were the headmaster, or let's say you had the power to expel people, and there was a student you knew beyond any doubt would try to kill Hermione as soon as he got the chance, and you were sure he'd eventually get the chance. Would you expel him, even without a good reason?"

The room was silent as Harry thought about it. "Yes, Neville, I would," he said quietly. "But that doesn't mean he's wrong. Maybe it just means I'm not strong enough."

"If that's true, Harry, then I hope you never are," said Neville firmly. "I know it doesn't mean he's wrong. But it also doesn't mean you're wrong. All I know is, I don't know how he can expose someone he loves to that kind of risk when it's in his power to prevent it. I couldn't."

Two days later, Harry finished recounting the conversation to Dumbledore, as the portraits of past headmasters listened attentively.

"I respect Neville's opinion, and those of the Aurors," he said. "No one can say they are wrong. It is simply a matter of judgment, and we each must make our own. For example, you have not said so yet, but I observe that you have decided to publicly support the measure restricting Apparation, but you hesitate to make your decision final, as you have not yet had my input. The fact is that you do not need it. I would tell you if there was more information which you needed but did not have, but there is not. You know the benefits, you know the dangers, you simply must weigh them. I would not attempt to persuade you, or to substitute my judgment for yours. We must each make our own decisions in such matters."

Harry breathed deeply. "I know what you're going to say before I even say this, but... I feel as though if I don't make the same decision that you would have made, then I made the wrong one. I know I shouldn't think that way, though."

"Quite true, though I cannot deny being flattered that you feel that way," said Dumbledore, amused.

Harry smiled. "I'm glad, sir. By the way, I do want to talk to Mr. Dentus before I make a final decision. Do you know how I can talk to him privately?"

"Yes, Harry, your office has a fireplace. I believe you used it a few times last year, when it was not your office. I will give you the name of his fireplace, and you can simply talk to him through that, if he is there. He has no specific job right now, so I believe it likely you will find him available." He wrote down the information on a piece of paper, and Harry took it.

Twenty minutes later, his head was in a fireplace, and he saw Dentus sit in a chair facing his fireplace. "Harry! This is quite a surprise. What can I do for you?"

"Well, Mr. Dentus, I-"

"Please call me Archibald, Harry."

Harry blinked; Dentus smiled. "Harry, you may be only sixteen, but what you have done makes you more than worthy to be treated with the same respect as any accomplished adult. You might as well get used to it."

"If you say so... Archibald."

"You were going to say 'sir,' weren't you, Harry?"

Now Harry smiled. "I guess some habits are hard to break. Anyway, there were a few things I wanted to talk to you about, that I didn't get to last Thursday but I couldn't have asked you at that time anyway."

"Because the Minister was present," Dentus guessed.

Harry nodded. "And also, I hadn't had much time to think about it. Now I have. It's kind of frustrating, because I can see this would be a good thing to do. I'm just extremely concerned... when I made that comment about the thin end of the wedge..."

Dentus nodded. "Frankly, Harry, I wanted to strangle him." Harry chuckled. "I really think he wasn't paying full attention to what you'd said-you shifted your focus from me to him suddenly, he may have been wandering mentally. He shouldn't, of course. For some reason he thought you were looking for a confirmation of the idea that we'd fight Voldemort as hard as possible."

"It's partly that," Harry agreed, "but also... you remember four years ago, the Chamber of Secrets was opened at Hogwarts." Dentus indicated that he was familiar with what had happened. "After several students had been Petrified, Fudge came out to Hogwarts and had Hagrid taken away to Azkaban, just on suspicion, no proof at all. His exact words to Professor Dumbledore were, 'got to be seen to be doing something.' I can't help but wonder, Archibald, this is the person I'm thinking of giving more power to?"

Dentus nodded solemnly. "That sort of thing, Harry, is exactly why Albus pays such scrupulous attention to principle. I respect him for it, even when I don't agree. Just because there are people like Fudge doesn't mean we can't exercise our judgment in difficult situations. Before I answer, I'd like to ask... I assume he opposes the measure?"

"I think so, but he didn't say it to me directly. He said it was a matter of judgment and that I had to use my own, that I didn't need his opinion and he shouldn't try to persuade me."

"Again, that's Dumbledore. See, he treats you like an accomplished adult, even if some don't. Most people in his position would use their influence to try to get you to do what they want. You respect him so much that you might very well do what he wanted you to do; he knows that, and so won't express a preference. He's really quite extraordinary.

"As to your question about Fudge... it's definitely a concern. I hadn't known that about Hagrid, but it doesn't shock me. Granted, I've been around politics long enough not to be surprised by much. Most politicians are more concerned with how something looks than with how it is. I know what kind of person Fudge is... and you may find this hard to believe, Harry, but fundamentally he means well. He wants to do the right thing. The thing about Voldemort coming back... that was probably the biggest mistake of his life, it was just too much for him to deal with. It was almost like finding an eight-year-old and saying here, lead this army into battle. The kid'll want to run and hide, and that's what Fudge did. You might ask why he was made Minister of Magic, but that's another long, long, story. The story about Hagrid, and when Voldemort came back, those are probably two of his worst misjudgments. He's not as bad as he would seem based on that."

"Well, I'll take your word for that, since I can't have seen it, and you have. So you think there is a danger from Fudge, but it's worth risking because of the benefits?"

Dentus nodded. "We just have to keep an eye on him. When you give the interview, without being too blunt, you'll want to make it clear that you're supporting the policy, not Fudge personally. You want to keep your distance somewhat. Given your experience with him, I'm sure that won't be hard. But keep in mind that supporting this gives you an influence you wouldn't otherwise have. If it goes on too long-let's imagine they wanted to continue the restriction even after Voldemort is defeated-or if they wanted to create more restrictions, you can help oppose it. Since you support this, people will take you seriously if you say it's gone on too long, or if they start doing other things that are too restrictive. By relying on your support,

they are giving you a measure of influence, of power. You can use it to make sure this doesn't go too far."

"I hope you're right." Harry shook his head. "Just what I want, to get drawn more into politics."

Dentus smiled sympathetically. "Sorry, Harry. But you can learn a lot by how Albus has handled it throughout his career. He's always done what he thought was right, without regard for any desire for power or influence. Ironically, that's partly why he has both. Maybe not so much with the public, but with those like you and I, who know him. Just stick to what you think is best, don't try to please anyone else, and you'll be all right."

"I think I can do that much. Oh, I was going to ask another thing. The Aurors were really solidly in favor of this when I talked to them on Saturday. Why didn't Fudge just go to the Aurors and get them to get me to help?"

"He did, Harry. They want this, but they refused to use their influence with you in that way," said Dentus in admiration.

Harry was also impressed. "They didn't even give me their opinion until I asked for it," he said. "Well, thank you, Archibald. I assume you'll be keeping your eyes open at the Ministry. Will you let me know if you start seeing anything disturbing?"

Dentus laughed. "I couldn't help but think, disturbing things happen there all the time, but I know what you mean. I'll certainly do that, Harry."

"Thanks, Archibald. See you later." Dentus said goodbye, and Harry withdrew from the fireplace. He sat back in his chair, lost in thought. The Apparation restriction was obviously a good idea. He had canvassed the teachers after lunch, and they were generally in favor of the idea itself, though distrustful of the Ministry. The Aurors thought it was a good idea, and so did his friends. Only Dumbledore apparently did not. As he prepared to lend his name to the idea, Harry couldn't help thinking that if Dumbledore didn't support it, it must be a mistake. Then he thought, if Snape hadn't searched the Slytherins' belongings, in violation of Dumbledore's wishes, I would be dead. This thought mitigated the disquiet he felt, but only a little.

* * * * *

HARRY POTTER ANNOUNCES SUPPORT FOR APPARATION RESTRICTION ACT

Voldemort Foe Says Proposed Regulation "Will Save Lives"

(Hogwarts) Hugo Brantell, Daily Prophet

Hogwarts Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts Harry Potter, whose continued defiance of the evil Dark wizard Voldemort has earned him four Voldemort-ordered attempts on his life in the past six months, yesterday announced his support of the proposed Apparation Restriction Act (ARA). The ARA, proposed by the Ministry of Magic two days ago, would temporarily suspend Apparation privileges for all but specifically authorized witches and wizards. (For full details of the act, see page 1 of yesterday's Daily Prophet.)

Asked why he supported the measure, Professor Potter said that he strongly felt that it would increase security for the wizarding community. "I've seen enough Dark wizards to know that Apparating is a very important weapon for them. Without the ability to Apparate freely, they'll be able to do less than they have."

Professor Potter also cited the support the measure has in the Auror community, a community he hopes to join after he graduates from Hogwarts. "The Aurors are out there taking risks every day so the rest of us can be safe," he said. "If we can make their job safer in a dangerous time by enduring a little inconvenience, then it seems like the least we can do."

The Ministry pronounced itself pleased by Professor Potter's decision. Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge released the following statement: "We are pleased to have Professor Potter's support for this necessary measure, and we hope that all wizards and witches will take his words to heart. We all want the most secure society possible."

Former Ministry Undersecretary Archibald Dentus, a strong proponent of the ARA, praised Professor Potter's statements. "Professor Potter's support is extremely welcome. Though he has led the fight against Voldemort with a seeming lack of concern for his own personal safety, he is obviously very concerned for the safety of all witches and wizards. I have met and talked with Professor Potter, and my strongest impression was that he simply wants to do the right thing. I hope he will give guidance to future politicians by his example. He exemplifies all the qualities one would expect to find in one chosen by a phoenix."

The following are excerpts from an interview that took place at Hogwarts yesterday morning.

Q: Professor, do you have any concerns about the measure?

A: Not about the measure itself, but about where it could lead. This gives us more security at a low cost. I wouldn't support anything that truly restricted our ability to travel. But this only restricts a particular type of travel. We have to be careful not to take away people's rights.

Q: Some people are surprised to see you supporting the Ministry. The Ministry, after all, spent most of last year conducting a campaign to discredit your claims that Voldemort had returned.

A: I'd be lying if I said that what happened last year didn't leave scars. I hope such a thing never happens again, to me or anyone. But the Ministry is supposed to represent the people, and it's the people I support. If the Ministry does something like this, which increases our security while not taking away rights, then I want to support it.

Q: That's the second time in a row you've mentioned the possibility of people's rights being taken away. That seems to be a strong concern of yours.

A: Yes, it is. In a dangerous time like this, security is very important. But history is full of examples of bad things happening when security becomes the only thing that matters. There has to be a balance, and we have to be vigilant.

Q: Your support for this measure comes shortly after the death of Percy Weasley in the most recent Death Eater attack. You are very close to the Weasley family. Is your support for this measure related to this attack, and his death?

A: This idea was explained to me, and I thought it was a good idea, before Percy's death, so it didn't influence my opinion. But it did remind me very strongly, all of us, what we're fighting against. Maybe this wouldn't have happened if this measure had been in place, I don't know. But any death is a tragedy, not only people I'm close to.

Q: Your mentor, Albus Dumbledore, has not expressed an opinion publicly on this measure. Does he support it? Did you ask for his guidance?

A: His guidance, which I always seek, was that I should make the decision that I felt was right, that I would be comfortable with. He felt that since I was the one being asked to give a public opinion, and that it was a matter of judgment, even giving me his opinion would be a form of pressure, which he wanted to avoid. And to tell you the truth, he's right; I would always be highly influenced by his opinion.

[Professor Dumbledore was unavailable for an interview by press time.]

Q: Thank you very much, Professor Potter.

Chapter 20

Easter

The month of March passed very quickly for Harry, busy as he was with his normal classes as a teacher and a student, his Saturdays with the Aurors, Quidditch practice, and his and Neville's informal teaching of what they learned from the Aurors. It occurred to him that even if he wanted to have a girlfriend, he wouldn't

have any time to pay attention to her, so it was just as well. Still, he felt the desire anyway, especially when he saw Hermione and Neville looking so happy when together.

The Apparation Restriction Act was enacted at the end of March, two days after two more attacks by Death Eaters, one on Muggles, one on wizards. Harry had wondered whether there would be any resentment directed towards him from the seventh year Hogwarts students, who'd had little chance to Apparate, and now would not be able to do something which they had long looked forward to. However, no one said anything to him or acted differently; he hoped that that would be the attitude of the population as well. Harry talked to Dentus a few more times to keep informed of what was happening, and in the most recent conversation Dentus reported that while some people grumbled and some businesses complained of higher transportation costs, most people were accepting, or at least resigned.

The Aurors were delighted, and many thanked Harry profusely the first Saturday after the ARA's enactment. "We've been really busy, of course," said Tonks. "A lot of people don't read the Prophet or even talk to other wizards much, and hadn't heard. We've gotten a lot of indignant reactions, people complaining about a police state, saying they just want to be left alone, and so forth. I want to say, 'yes, and thank you for being such an involved and concerned citizen,' but I don't. I just give them the pamphlet we give everyone, tell them that next time there will be consequences, and let them go. People basically get warnings for a week, and after that, it gets more serious. We still have to go in teams of two, on the off chance that it is Death Eaters."

When Easter vacation finally arrived, Harry wanted to spend it at the Burrow, but he didn't because of security considerations. The Aurors were so busy warning ARA violators that it would have been too great a burden for them to also provide security for the Burrow, and Harry easily understood. He contented himself with two dinners, both after Auror training sessions, of which he and Neville had four through the week. Harry now understood how important they considered his training, to make sure it happened even when they were very busy.

On the first Monday after vacation, Harry walked with Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville to breakfast. They had waited for him, and planned to stay with him even more than before, now that Malfoy was back, probably with a new supply of Dark Arts items. As they entered the Great Hall and headed towards their normal seats, the others kept their eyes wide open, looking for anything, not being at all subtle about their intent. Harry heard some murmuring and a few chuckles at the sight.

Even as they ate, one was always scanning the area ostentatiously, and the others glanced around the room far more than was normal. Harry wanted to make a

comment or joke, but didn't, as he knew how it would be received. He knew they all remembered too well what had happened the first day back from the last vacation.

About halfway through breakfast, Hedrick Flatt and Helen Clark walked up to Harry at the Gryffindor table. "Professor," Helen said without preamble, "Something strange is going on outside the Slytherin area. Professor Dumbledore is outside our portrait hole, and he's saying hello to all the Slytherins as they leave for breakfast."

"He's checking for anyone under the Imperius Curse," said Hermione, as Harry had deduced the same thing. "Good idea, but knowing him, I'm almost surprised he'll even do that."

"I should hope he would," said Neville, as Ron and Ginny agreed. "And it looks like it was a good idea, look." They could now see Malfoy and Pansy taking their seats at the Slytherin table, but not Crabbe. "Crabbe's stuck to Malfoy like glue since Goyle died," Neville continued. "And Crabbe was the next candidate to be put under the Imperius Curse. They'll have been looking for him, and they must have got him."

"Thank goodness," said Hermione, "if that's true. I mean, God only knows what they were going to have him do, blow up the whole Hall just to get Harry? They know we won't let him get anywhere near Harry." Hedrick and Helen nodded approvingly.

"What, did you decide you were going to Stun him if he got within five yards of me?" joked Harry.

Ron answered him, deadly serious. "Fifteen yards is what we decided, Harry, him or Malfoy. Hermione insisted that we had to give him a warning, but then if he doesn't stop, he goes down. I don't care if it looks like he's just going to the bathroom."

Harry was startled. "You can't do that! You're prefects, and-"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Harry's being stupid again," he said, as Hermione added, "Come on, Harry, do you think we care about that right now? Think a little." She turned and said to the Slytherins, "He's really pretty clever, most of the time." They chuckled.

Neville suddenly stood. "Ron, Hermione." He pointed at Malfoy, heading towards their table, still a good distance away. They stood immediately and headed in Malfoy's direction, obviously to cut him off before he got anywhere near Harry. Ron looked over his shoulder, saying, "Ginny, sit on him."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "I assume he just meant that you were supposed to make sure I didn't move until they got back?"

She fixed him with a serious look. "Try to move, and you'll find out."

Harry decided not to try, and just watch to see what happened. Hermione, Ron, and Neville, wands out, met Malfoy at the midpoint of the aisle, between the

Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables. Malfoy, to Harry's surprise, did not have his wand out, but he did have his usual smugness.

"Out of my way, you three. I was just going to say hello to Professor Potter, ask him if he had a good vacation," he sneered. "Don't worry, no harm will come to your leader's scar. I can't imagine he's scared to talk to me." He rolled up his sleeves halfway and held up his hands. "Look, see, no guns."

The Hall was silent; nobody seemed to think Malfoy's comment was funny. "Go back to your table and sit down, Malfoy," said Ron. "This is your only warning. If you don't think we're serious, try us."

"Is this on your authority as a prefect?" asked Malfoy, amused.

"No," said Neville, calmly, to Harry's surprise. "It's on his authority as one of the three people who's going to send you flying across the Hall if you don't go back and sit down." This was greeted by some cheers and applause from all tables.

"You can't stop me from going anywhere in this Hall I want," said Malfoy with certainty. "Your fearless leader can leave the Hall if he's afraid of me," he added, more loudly.

Harry knew that Malfoy wanted to provoke him into going over there. Ginny tensed a bit next to him. "Don't worry, Ginny, I'm not going for it," he assured her.

"He's not afraid of Voldemort, Malfoy, why should he be afraid of you?" Neville said, in as close to a sneer as Harry had ever heard from him.

As Neville spoke, Harry saw a few people get up. Justin, Ernie, Hannah, Anthony Goldstein, Cho, and Luna were all up, with wands out, and heading over to where Harry's friends had intercepted Malfoy. They took up position behind Ron, Neville, and Hermione.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "I don't care how many of you there are, I can walk where I want. Does he really need the whole school to protect him from me?"

This was greeted by a mass of chairs shuffling, and people getting up. About half of the students in the Hall, including many Slytherins, had stood and were starting to head to where the others were standing. Harry was touched, and exchanged a smile with Ginny.

Professor McGonagall got up from the teachers' table-Harry wondered why she had waited this long-and briskly walked over to the rapidly increasing crowd around Malfoy. "Everyone, please take your seats," she said loudly. "Mr. Malfoy, please return to your table," she said to him.

Malfoy looked outraged. "I can get up and walk anywhere I want to! You have no right to tell me-"

"Here is what I am telling you, Mr. Malfoy," she said, in her sternest 'I mean business' tone. "If you say one more word, or are not sitting in your seat at the table in one minute, you will be expelled. You have been warned."

The Hall was quiet as everyone watched Malfoy. He glared at McGonagall for ten seconds, then turned without a word and headed back to his seat. Hermione, Ron, and Neville thanked the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs backing them up, and returned to the table.

"Thanks, everyone," said Harry, as his friends resumed their seats.

"Well, he definitely wasn't under the Imperius Curse," said Hermione. "I'm sure he just wanted to come over and insult you a bit."

"Yes, but the problem is, he probably thinks of it as his last chance while Harry's still alive," pointed out Neville. Ron nodded his agreement.

"I seem pretty safe, if what we just saw was any indication," said Harry. The others looked at him skeptically.

"I wish it was, Harry, but you and we know it's not," said Hermione. "He'll have things that will be very hard to defend against. He probably won't even be near you when whatever he does happens. We'll just have to react quickly and hope for the best."

Ron grinned. "I liked what you said there, Neville."

"Yeah, it was pretty good," agreed Ginny. "It's amazing, Neville, how you can be tough and cute at the same time." The others laughed, especially Hermione, as Neville turned a light shade of red and smiled at Ginny. Harry returned to his breakfast.

The morning owls came pouring through the open windows of the Great Hall, and started dropping their mail. Just then, a loud explosion was heard, and the Hall shook, as if there had been a small earthquake. The frightened owls screeched and flew erratically, a few dropping their packages and letters in the wrong places. McGonagall flew out of her seat, running toward the sound of the explosion. Harry and his friends exchanged looks, silently speculating.

"I think," Ron finally said, "that we have just heard the last of Mr. Victor Crabbe."

"I'm just praying he didn't take anyone with him," said Ginny.

"Good point, Dumbledore would have been the one with him," added Neville.

Ron shook his head. "No bomb is going to kill Albus Dumbledore."

"I really, really hope you're right," said Harry. They looked around, but could not see any evidence of what had happened. A minute later, Dumbledore strode into the Great Hall, and stepped up to the lectern at the teachers' table.

"Your attention, please. The explosion you just heard and felt was, as you have no doubt guessed, the latest attempt on Professor Harry Potter's life by Voldemort.

Mr. Victor Crabbe, under the Imperius Curse, smuggled a small but powerful explosive into Hogwarts. His goal was to get as close as possible to Professor Potter and set off the explosive. As I discovered too late, the bomb had a device which would set it off when exposed to magic. Professor Snape, who was assisting me, was able to put up a shield at the last second protecting us from physical damage, saving my life. Obviously, Mr. Crabbe was killed in the explosion."

"Two down, one to go," Ron muttered. Hermione glared at him, her look saying, 'I'm not sorry he's dead either, but don't say things like that.'

"That is all, thank you for your attention," concluded Dumbledore, who walked away.

Hermione was surprised. "They're not canceling classes? They did after Goyle died."

"I think that was because we all saw it with our own eyes," speculated Neville. "This one we just heard, maybe that's the difference."

"But... I mean, think about what would have happened if they hadn't gotten to him," said Hermione. "You felt that... it would have killed a lot of the people in this room."

"What are you thinking, Harry?" asked Ginny. Harry had been listening, with many thoughts competing for attention in his mind.

He shook his head. "I'm not sure... just thinking about what Hermione said. Thank goodness they didn't think of giving Goyle the bomb."

"Look at Pansy and Malfoy," Neville whispered. Harry looked across the Hall, and saw Pansy touching the face of a shaken-looking Malfoy, who was trying not to look shaken. They saw her take his hand and talk to him.

Hermione shook her head. "I respect her so much," she whispered.

"Me, too," said Ginny. "I don't know how she does it. I couldn't." She looked at Harry, who nodded somberly and said, "I hope to God nothing happens to her."

"Look at him," said Ron disdainfully. "He's all upset because he knows that bomb could have taken him with it. Doesn't he know that he's just another slab of meat to Voldemort, that he doesn't matter? Didn't he know what he was signing up for?"

"Probably his father neglected to mention that to him," agreed Harry.

"Looks like he knows it now," said Ron. "He's in it way too deep to back out now, though."

They finished their now-cold breakfast, and headed off to their classes. Harry's first years expressed their vast relief that he had survived, their lack of sadness over Crabbe's death, and their amazement that Dumbledore still allowed Malfoy in the school. Harry decided not to try to explain matters of principle to

them, especially since Dumbledore took it to greater lengths than he would, and simply expressed faith that whatever Dumbledore decided would work out.

After morning classes and lunch, Harry went to the staff room, but Hermione and Neville insisted on accompanying him, and that he stay there until before two o'clock, when they could come get him. He nodded and entered the room, and sat down on the sofa next to John. The room was unusually quiet, and Harry wondered if it was because of him. Deciding to be irreverent, he said, "So, what's new?"

A few teachers looked at him strangely, and John chuckled. "The condemned man cheerfully declined the blindfold and cigarette," he said.

"Is that a quote from Muggle literature, John?" asked Sprout. "Or just your sense of humor?"

"It's my comment on Harry's sense of humor," John explained. "You'd think there wasn't another attempt on his life coming at him, clear as day. That doesn't bother you, Harry?"

Harry thought about it. "It probably would if it hadn't happened so many times already. I don't know if you can say I'm used to it, but I do know that it's going to keep happening as long as Voldemort and I are both still alive. It's almost like the status quo, though I know there's one coming up fairly soon. But it might be awhile, too-maybe they want to wait until I'm not so on my guard. So it doesn't have to be in the next day or two."

"Just an ordinary day of danger, if you're Harry Potter," said Flitwick. "And it doesn't bother you that this could all go away if Professor Dumbledore just expelled Malfoy?"

Harry raised his eyebrows and looked around the room; it was very rare to hear even an implied criticism of Dumbledore. Noting his look, Sprout said, "Harry, we all love him, you know that. But that doesn't mean we always agree with him. He's taking a huge risk for the sake of principle."

"And what is the point of having principles," asked McGonagall, "if you abandon them in difficult circumstances?"

Sprout sighed. "We've been through all this, Minerva. I was just explaining to Harry that we don't all agree on this. I'm sure we'd like to know what you think, Harry."

Harry thought about how he should answer, then decided that the truth was best. "Neville asked me, would I expel someone if Hermione was in my position, and I said yes, I would. But that doesn't mean I think that Professor Dumbledore is wrong. I respect his devotion to principle." He went on to say the same thing to them that he had to Dentus about what happened to Hagrid in the second year. "That's what

can happen when you decide to take action against people just based on speculation. Now, I know this is a very different situation, but the idea is similar. So if I have to be put at risk so that kind of thing doesn't happen, then I will."

"And your friends, who are in the line of fire as well?" asked Flitwick quietly. "Whatever Malfoy does could miss you and hit them."

Harry nodded. "That bothers me more than anything else. But I just have to trust him. There's nothing else I can do."

Nobody said anything for a moment, then Sprout sat down next to him on the sofa. "That's very admirable, Harry," she said. "Let's hope it goes well. We want you back next year." Harry nodded his thanks and said nothing.

Harry relaxed and talked with the teachers about other topics until a quarter to two, at which time Snape got up to leave. Harry had occasionally walked to Potions with Snape, if only because Snape's leaving reminded him that it was time to go. "Will you be coming to Potions, Professor?" asked Snape, as Harry failed to move from the sofa.

Harry shook his head. "I promised Hermione and Neville I'd stay here until they came to pick me up."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "I believe I can guarantee your safety during the long and treacherous journey from here to the Potions dungeon."

Harry chuckled, as did a few other teachers. "I'm sure you can, but that isn't the point. It'll make them feel better to take me, so I'll wait for them."

"As you wish, Professor," said Snape, turning to leave. "But I shall not look kindly upon your lateness, so be prompt, even if they are not."

As the door closed, Harry said to Sprout, "I wanted to ask him just what he would look kindly on."

She chuckled, as did Flitwick. "Better that you didn't, Harry," he said. "You don't want to tweak him too much. Once a year is enough."

Hermione and Neville showed up at eight minutes to two, and Harry and Hermione walked into the Potions dungeon with a minute to spare. After Potions, it was their custom to meet in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom with Ron, Neville, and Ginny, and he and Neville would teach the others some of what they had learned the previous Saturday. As they walked there, Hermione humorously asked, "So, did you thank Snape for saving Dumbledore's life?"

"I would have if I thought it would mean anything to him," Harry replied. "But you know him, he'd just react like I had said something totally irrelevant." He then told her about the conversation in the staff room.

"Well, I'm not surprised they'd feel like that," she said, looking around from time to time, on her guard. "Dumbledore's position on this is a bit extreme, though I

grant you, the Hagrid story is very appropriate. That is exactly what can happen. Still, to allow someone you love to be put in that kind of jeopardy..."

They had reached the hallway leading to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom; Harry could see Neville standing outside the door, on guard. He waved, and they walked toward him.

Harry suddenly felt a buzzing in his robes. He stopped walking, took out the Galleon, and showed it to Hermione; it was the emergency signal from Pansy. "Neville!" she shouted. "Get the others, and get over here!" Harry saw Neville shout into the classroom, and then run over to him and Hermione, with Ron and Ginny following a few seconds behind. All had their wands drawn, surrounding Harry. Neville walked up to the next corner and looked around it, but saw nothing. Hermione took out her map.

"Where is she... ah, she's with Malfoy, they're..." she went silent for a moment, then continued, "Ah, they're moving. Nowhere near us. Okay, Harry, you know the drill."

Before vacation had ended, they had all agreed on what would be done in this kind of situation. Pansy's sending of the emergency signal was to be interpreted as a sign that Harry's life was in imminent danger. He was not to move, and was to go immediately to Dumbledore's office by using Fawkes. Fawkes appeared, presenting his tail feathers for Harry to grab. "Be very careful," he urged the others.

Hermione nodded impatiently. "We will, Harry. Now, go!"

Harry grabbed Fawkes's tail, but said nothing; he had discovered that by now, he did not need to tell Fawkes where to go, as Fawkes always knew. They appeared in Dumbledore's office; Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape were talking. "She sent the signal," he said. "The others are near the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom." He took out his Hogwarts map and opened it up, looking for the purple spot. "Okay, there they are, heading to the Slytherin area. Now, does she just know, or has he had a chance to do anything... show me Malfoy, the last four hours, sixty times normal speed, ten times normal speed when moving."

As they watched, McGonagall let out a low whistle. "I assume Hermione did this?"

Involved in watching the map, Harry nodded. "Ron and Ginny have been keeping an eye on this all day, and it'll go off if he goes anyplace unusual, but apparently he didn't... no, the closest place he comes to me is the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, but he didn't stop... still, look at his path, he just seems to have walked around it for no good reason. That has to be it."

"Minerva, please meet Harry's friends where they are now, and escort them to your office, pending further instructions." As she left, Dumbledore addressed Snape.

"Severus, please fetch Mr. Malfoy and escort him here." Snape swept out of the office. "Harry, when Mr. Malfoy is almost here, please ask Fawkes to take you to my living quarters, and stay there until I ask him to bring you back here." Agreeing, Harry sat down to wait, keeping an eye on the map. He saw McGonagall approach his friends, and saw them all walk away from the classroom. He saw Snape with Malfoy and Pansy in the Slytherin common room, and then saw Snape and Malfoy walking towards Dumbledore's office. As they approached the gargoyles, Harry prepared to ask Fawkes to take him away.

Suddenly, Malfoy's dot disappeared from the map; it was only Snape near the gargoyles. "Professor!" Harry nearly shouted, pointing to the map. "Malfoy's dot just disappeared." Speaking to the map, he said, "Show Malfoy." The map was blank.

Snape walked in, and seeing the blank map, knew that Harry and Dumbledore knew what had happened. "Of course, he did not Disapparate," said Snape. "He simply vanished, without a sound. He was a step behind me, so I did not see it, but I know he did not run or escape by other means."

Dumbledore nodded. "Please fetch Miss Parkinson, and on your way there, stop by Minerva's office and have her bring Harry's friends here, please." Snape nodded and left.

"How did he do that, sir?" Harry asked Dumbledore.

"There are Dark Arts items which allow the user to perform a few acts of teleportation before being used up," Dumbledore explained.

Harry continued looking at the map. His friends were on the way, and Snape was entering the Slytherin common room. After a minute, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville entered the office, followed by McGonagall. Harry started explaining what had happened with Malfoy. Another minute later, Snape and Pansy entered.

"Pansy, why did you send the signal?" asked Dumbledore.

"I got Malfoy to tell me what he was doing," said Pansy, as Hermione seemed to twitch involuntarily. "He put up some item on the door that's the entrance to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. It's been made invisible. Apparently it puts out this field of deadly energy that grows with time. He said it can be set to affect only one person, and of course that person is Harry. No one would have noticed a thing until Harry walked near enough to the door, and then he would have been killed instantly."

"We were about to pass by that door, less than a minute away," said Hermione, looking appalled.

"Thank goodness," said Pansy fervently. "I sent the signal the instant he told me, I'm so glad it was in time. Is he still in danger?" she asked, now addressing Dumbledore.

"We have no information about that, so we must assume he is," replied Dumbledore. "The device Malfoy used to escape has a limited range, I believe, so he may still be in the area; for example, he could be hiding in the Forbidden Forest. Even if he is outside Hogwarts, as this map would seem to suggest, he cannot Apparate away, as that would alert the Aurors. He could take a Portkey, of course, but we should assume he is still a threat."

"We have to have around-the-clock security on Harry," said Ron. "He could use that thing to pop into our dormitory at three in the morning and off him."

"Do not worry, Ron, it will be attended to," said Dumbledore reassuringly. "I believe I know a few people who will volunteer for the job. Severus, will you please go find and deactivate the device?" Snape nodded and was gone.

"Sir," asked Harry, "Will Malfoy know that Pansy told us? Is there any other way he knows of that we could have found out?"

Pansy looked surprised. "What does it matter, Harry? He's gone, and if he comes back, it'll be to finish you off."

"Harry is still concerned for your safety," explained Dumbledore to Pansy, who gave him an annoyed but affectionate look. To Harry, Dumbledore said, "He can speculate, and the timing of events would seem to suggest it, but he cannot know. In addition, she had no opportunity to talk to anyone from the time he told her to the time Professor Snape took him to my office. It is most likely that he will assume he was found out some other way. For the time being, to be prudent, we will not yet reveal Pansy's role to anyone else at Hogwarts. But Pansy is correct, Harry, it is your safety we must focus on."

"The device he is using to teleport not only has a limited number of uses-three, I believe-but a limited life as well. It can only be used for twenty-four hours after it is first used, so after that time, the threat to Harry will have decreased greatly. For now, Harry must not remain unattended, even for so short a time as a trip to the restroom."

Ron grinned. "Well, Neville, looks like taking Harry to the loo is our job, then." Harry rolled his eyes. More seriously, Ron asked, "We have a Quidditch practice tonight. Should we cancel it?"

"Given the nature of Malfoy's teleportation device, I would say Harry is at least as safe on the pitch as anyplace else, perhaps more so. If Hermione and Neville fly their usual patrols, I see no problem. Pansy, you did not get the sense that there are any other traps he has laid for Harry?"

She shook her head. "No, he seemed pretty sure that this one would do it. I think he would have told me if there were others."

"Very well. You should feel free to resume your normal activities, though of course you should go nowhere near the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom until Professor Snape confirms that he has removed the device. And Pansy... thank you."

Harry's friends echoed the sentiment, and Hermione threw her arms around Pansy, hugging her fiercely. Pansy was a little startled, but smiled. "All of you... I know you'll watch him carefully. I wish I could do it with you, but I guess Professor Dumbledore's right, I should keep my head down a little while longer. But I can't tell you how glad I am that I'm done dealing with him."

"Boy, can I understand that," agreed Harry. He looked at her, wanting to express how grateful he was, but he couldn't think of any words strong enough to say what he wanted.

She smiled. "Harry, remember what I said a long time ago, that your eyes are very expressive? Well, they are now, too. It's okay, you don't have to think of any words. Your eyes already said it."

He nodded. "They probably said it better than my words could have anyway."

Pansy left Dumbledore's office first; Harry and the others followed a minute later. They walked back to the Gryffindor common room, and had the teaching session they had planned to have in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.

The story of what had happened, except for Pansy's involvement, was starting to spread around the school by dinnertime. Several students had seen Snape dismantling the device Malfoy had put up, and asked about it. Harry and his friends could see no reason not to tell them. People expressed relief that Harry was all right, and happiness that Malfoy would no longer be at Hogwarts. Hermione emphasized, though, that Malfoy could yet return, so they still had to be vigilant. When Harry expressed surprise that she would go out of her way to mention that to people, she replied, "I don't want people to let their guard down, I want them to still be looking out for you. You're still in a good deal of danger." Harry didn't argue, but still felt that Pansy was in more danger than he was.

After dinner, they all headed out to the Quidditch pitch, along with the rest of the Gryffindor team. Harry practiced his search patterns and looking for the Snitch as the rest of the team practiced their usual maneuvers. They were mostly practicing standard moves, because Ginny was so fast on the Firebolt that they had to re-learn them taking into account the Firebolt's speed. A few minutes into the practice, Harry noticed that there were more brooms in the air than there should have been. Looking more closely, he saw that four more people—Justin, Ernie, Cho, and Terry—were on brooms, circling the pitch with Neville and Hermione. Harry got the

feeling that most of the first years would be there, too, if they were allowed their own brooms.

After the practice, they all set down, and Harry profusely thanked the four for their gesture of support. Terry smiled and said, "Really, it was just a chance to spy on your practice. Ginny, you're really good on that thing. Somehow I have a feeling that Dennis won't be scoring all the goals this time for you guys."

"Thanks, Terry," she said. "But I think it would be hard not to be good on that broom."

"I'm sure Malfoy could manage it," said Ron.

"So, he could still come back?" asked Ernie. "With that thing he used to escape?"

"Yes," Ron answered. "Dumbledore thinks that in forty-eight hours, Harry'll be safe. Well, as safe as he ever is. At least now, Malfoy'll be gone, along with the people who supported him."

"What about that Pansy Parkinson?" asked Cho with distaste. "She's always supported him, being really nasty to people, and she's still here. Isn't she a danger?"

Harry fought to keep his face expressionless. Hermione said, trying to sound dismissive, "She's not the type to risk her own neck, Cho. With Crabbe and Goyle, their fathers were Death Eaters, so they didn't mind sacrificing their sons to Voldemort. Her father isn't, so they won't use her for that. And now that Malfoy's gone, she'll keep her head down. But don't worry, we'll keep our eyes open." Harry could imagine how hard it was for Hermione to say that.

"Well, we will too," said Cho. "I hope you're right, but- what, Harry?"

Harry had stopped walking. "The signal," he said. Pulling out the Galleon, he added, "It's her." Ginny, Neville, and Hermione immediately got out their wands, and Ron got out his map. Harry shouted, "No! This isn't an emergency signal, it's a distress signal! She wouldn't know anything new unless Malfoy was back, and if he is, she's in trouble. Fawkes!"

Fawkes instantly appeared, presenting his tail feathers. The four non-Gryffindors gaped at the unexpected turn of events. "She's in her dormitory, alone," said Ron. "Show Malfoy, fifteen minutes, one hundred twenty times normal speed." The map was blank for four seconds, then showed Malfoy in the Slytherin sixth year girls' dormitory for three, after which he disappeared from the map again.

"Harry, don't!" Hermione almost screamed, pleading. "It could be a trap! He could've made her tell him about the Galleon, sent the signal! Please-"

But Harry had already decided to go. He grabbed Fawkes' tail feathers, felt Fawkes start to lift off. Hermione suddenly jumped onto him, arms around his neck, and the next thing he knew, they were in the Slytherin sixth year girls' dormitory.

Harry looked down, and was chilled to the bone by what he saw. Pansy was on the floor, barely conscious, and there was blood everywhere. Her robes and shirt had been torn open, and her stomach was covered with blood.

"Pansy!" Hermione shrieked, and bent down to look at her. "Oh, my God..."

Harry noticed out of the corner of his eye what looked like an open door in the middle of the room, leading into blackness. He wanted to investigate it, but he knew what he had to do first. Grabbing Fawkes' tail, he was suddenly in the infirmary.

"Madam Pomfrey!" he shouted.

She walked towards him. "What-"

"Someone's been stabbed!" he shouted. She grabbed a bag as he said, "Hold on to me!" She put her arms around his chest and shoulders and held tight. Putting one arm around her shoulders, he grabbed hold of Fawkes again, and they were back in the dormitory.

Madam Pomfrey swore and bent over, opening her bag. Hermione was touching Pansy's face, saying "It'll be okay, Pansy, don't worry." Madam Pomfrey waved her wand at Pansy's stomach, and the blood disappeared, making the wound clear. Though it continued bleeding, it was easy to see exactly how Malfoy had cut her. The cut was about nine inches long, and was shaped exactly like the scar on Harry's forehead. Harry winced and shook his head in disbelief. Hermione gasped, looked at Harry sadly, then continued talking to the nearly-unconscious Pansy reassuringly. Pansy mumbled something to Hermione that Harry couldn't hear.

Fawkes fluttered down and landed on Pansy's chest. He leaned over, and a tear fell onto the wound, followed by two more. Even though Fawkes had once saved Harry's life that way, Harry had forgotten that phoenixes did that. He silently thanked Fawkes, then looked at the doorway, which could not have been more obviously meant for him. He almost stepped through it automatically, but forced himself to stop and think. Seeming to know what he was thinking, Hermione said urgently, "Don't go, Harry, there's no reason to-"

They were interrupted by a horrible scream coming from the doorway. Harry was sure that it was from the Cruciatus Curse being used. It was female, but he wasn't sure-

"Ginny," said Hermione, looking terrified. "But how could that be Ginny? She was just with us-"

"I'm not going to sit around and debate it," Harry said firmly. He knew he was going through.

"But, Harry," started Hermione, but one look at his face told her it would be useless. "Focus on love, Harry," she urged him. "Come from the same place you did with Voldemort."

Harry nodded, tried to calm his thoughts as Ginny continued screaming, and stepped through the doorway.

The door seemed to close behind him, and it took his eyes a moment to adjust to the sudden darkness. It was not pitch black, but there was very little light. Ginny continued screaming, much more loudly now that he was in the room. Wand already out, without thinking, Harry summoned up the shield that he had created to protect against the Cruciatus Curse, and pointed his wand at Ginny, lying on the ground fifteen feet in front of him. He saw the silvery shield snap on. Ginny stopped screaming, her body slack. He started to run up to her, but found he couldn't move. Fawkes appeared in the air above him, singing.

"Avada Kedavra!" shouted Malfoy, who Harry still could not see, and the green bolt came at him. As he had at Hogsmeade, Fawkes swooped down and swallowed the curse, bursting into flames. Again, he was now a chick walking around the ground.

Slowly, Harry started to be able to make out his surroundings. Near Ginny was what looked like a glass or plastic wall, six feet high and six feet wide. He could now see Malfoy behind it. He knew that it would repel any magic, and that Malfoy was using it as a shield.

Malfoy looked even more smug than usual, if that was possible. "Knew you couldn't resist coming, Potter, being all heroic as you are. You should thank me, now you know that your spell works on other people, too. Too bad you'll never have a chance to tell anyone about it."

Harry tried again to move, but could not. He remembered Hermione's advice, and focused on love. He could feel it all around him. Don't be baited, he thought. He didn't try to attack Malfoy through the shield, knowing it would be useless, and could even bounce back onto him. Harry looked around, and could now see enough to know that they were in the Chamber of Secrets, and that Ginny was lying very close to where she had four years ago.

Malfoy saw Harry's look of recognition. "Yes, I thought this was a good place for this. The Dark Lord almost finished you off here four years ago, but couldn't quite manage it. And now, I get to finish the job. Oh, I've been looking forward to this."

Harry had no desire to listen to Malfoy gloat, but also had no inclination to say anything. He didn't want to give Malfoy the satisfaction. He focused on love, and on a way out of the situation. He tried to move his feet, and again, he couldn't.

"No, you're staying put," said Malfoy, noticing Harry's movements. "I had to use up half the stuff Father had saved, but this is worth it. That will keep you in

place, this," gesturing to the wall, "will keep me safe, and this, which you can't see back here, this brought her here."

Harry still said nothing, but couldn't keep confusion off his face. "Yes, you might never have heard of it, being upstanding and all, and this is a classic Dark Arts item. It takes the person who is most loved by the target person within a mile or so and transports them away. Really amazing, actually." Malfoy looked genuinely pleased. "I was a bit surprised it was her, but I guess since Granger got taken by Longbottom—now there's a couple, they really deserve each other—you had to set your sights even lower. Could be worse, I thought there was a chance it would take her brother," Malfoy snickered. "You love him so much, you got him a Firebolt."

Harry felt there was a lot he could say, but again said nothing. He continued to focus on love. He wondered what he could do. He couldn't move, his wand was useless except to protect Ginny, Fawkes had already taken a Killing Curse, and Malfoy could kill him any time he wanted.

Malfoy seemed to be reading his mind. "Not much you can do, is there? I only sent the first Killing Curse to get rid of the phoenix, can't have him running off and bringing Dumbledore here. No, this is just you and me. This is my reward for putting up with you for six years. Harry Potter, the golden boy." He paused. "You really have nothing to say?"

Harry could see he was getting to him. He raised his eyebrows slightly and shook his head, still silent. Malfoy rolled his eyes. "I Silenced her, Potter, not you. I know you're just trying to annoy me. I'm surprised that you'd bother, given that you're going to die very soon, and the longer you keep me entertained, the longer you stay alive. Well, I'll let her speak now, see what she has to say." He pointed his wand at her. She still couldn't move, but Harry could see her eyes. She stared up at Malfoy, her expression stony.

"Following his example, I see," Malfoy said, more annoyed. "Tell you what, Weasley... your boyfriend here's going to die in a few minutes. If you talk to me, I might let him live."

Harry knew, of course, that that was a lie. Ginny apparently did as well, as she continued her silence.

'All right, then," sighed Malfoy, "here we go... no final words, even? I promise to relay them to the Prophet."

Harry could only think of one thing to try. He had no idea whether it would work, but there was nothing else. He concentrated, and visualized a shield, similar to the one that stopped the Cruciatus Curse, again composed of the energy of love. He saw it in his mind, and noticed that its color was green. I wonder why it's green, he

thought. But as he saw it, he suddenly knew that it would work. He wasn't even sure how he knew, but he knew. He focused more deeply on love; he was ready.

"So long, Potter... Avada Kedavra!" Malfoy stuck his arm from behind his shield and fired off a green bolt. A vivid green shield snapped on around Harry, and the Killing Curse hit it, fizzled, and died.

Malfoy gaped, unable to believe what he had just seen. Ginny said nothing, but smiled at Harry, delirious with joy and relief. Harry smiled back, then had a flash of understanding about what he had just done. He realized that this shield and the Cruciatus shield were not just isolated spells he had found, but were related, and that there could be a whole class of spells that could only be done by using the energy of love. He didn't linger on the thought, however, as there was still Malfoy to deal with.

Malfoy tried again, and again, the Killing Curse was absorbed by Harry's shield. Seeming to know it would not work, but needing to try anyway, Malfoy pointed his wand at Ginny and said the words. Even as he said them, the green shield snapped on around Ginny, and the bolt dissipated.

Malfoy looked furious and disbelieving, much as Voldemort had in the fifth dream, when Harry had used the other new spell for the first time. "You're still going to die, Potter, just more slowly and painfully. We're in the Chamber of Secrets, and it's been sealed off. No one knows where you are. You can't Disapparate out, and your phoenix can't get you out. I have a way out, of course, but you two will starve and die. I'd rather have watched it myself, but I guess we can't have everything."

He opened what seemed to be a trap door in the floor, and stepped into it. With only his head showing, he grabbed a few things. The shield disappeared, and Harry could now move. Harry aimed his wand, but Malfoy had already ducked below the ground. He pulled the trap door shut, and the ground was just stone; there was no evidence that anything had ever been there.

Ginny could now move as well, but she couldn't stand up. Harry ran to her, sat next to her, and held her. "Harry... I don't believe it..."

"Yeah, it was kind of a surprise to me, too. Well... no Fawkes, no Diffusion, I guess I had to come up with something myself."

She pulled back to see his face, and shook her head. "Something that no other wizard in history has been able to do... I'm overwhelmed, Harry, I don't know what to say. I feel like... even if he's right and we do starve and die here, at least I got to be with you at the end." She looked at him with powerful emotion, a look that he had seen before...

It all came to him in an instant; he had seen that look as she held him right after the fourth dream, and he hadn't been able to identify it. He could now. She

was in love with him. And in that instant he knew he was in love with her as well. He had been for, he wasn't sure how long, but he realized he hadn't even admitted it to himself. He was still very afraid, and what had just happened intensified that fear; Ginny had almost been killed precisely because she was the person he loved most. I can't expose her to this risk, he thought, I just can't. I couldn't bear to lose her, or to have her lose me. After this is over...

All this took less than a second to go through his mind as he looked at her, then he pulled her to him again, holding her. After a few seconds, he said, "That's not going to happen. He has to be wrong."

"What do you think we can do?" she asked.

"Well, of course we can search it, see if we find anything interesting, but it's not likely. I think the thing to do is try to Disapparate."

"But Harry, I can't Disapparate. And you heard him, you know that you can't Apparate or Disapparate into or out of Hogwarts."

"I might be able to take you with me, if I can," Harry said. "The Aurors do it, they did it with you once. But even if I can't take you with me, I could go get help. If I can get out, someone can get in. And I know about the thing about Hogwarts, but this is so far underground, maybe it's not considered part of Hogwarts, maybe you just can't Apparate or Disapparate from the surface. It'd be stupid not to try."

"Okay," she said, struggling to her feet. "Wow, I can barely get up. The Cruciatus Curse, it's so horrible... thank goodness I have a friend who knows how to stop it." She smiled and looked at him proudly.

"I was very glad I could," he said. "Now, how do we do this... okay, I think the best thing is for me to carry you. The only problem is that if I go and you don't, you'll fall. I just don't know if I can do it like they can, with the hands on the shoulders."

"Right now, Harry, it wouldn't surprise me if you were able to get the moon turning around the Earth the other way. But you should do it however you want. Sorry, I didn't mean to embarrass you," she said, as she saw red creep into Harry's cheeks. "I'm just a bit awestruck for some reason."

"I'll deal with it," he said. He bent over and picked up the baby Fawkes, and put him carefully into a pocket in his robes. "Okay, let me pick you up..." Still holding his wand, he bent down, his left arm around her back, and picked her up. He grunted with the effort.

"Am I too heavy for you?" she asked humorously. Ginny's build was normal, so Harry knew she was teasing him.

"No, just never picked up another person before. Okay, I need to concentrate for a minute..." Again he calmed his mind, focusing on love. Now, though, when he focused on love, he saw her face. He looked at her, he saw how she looked at him. He

was still frightened, but what was in her eyes made him feel better than he could recall ever feeling. He summoned a mental image of the Hogwarts gates, the closest place to Hogwarts that he could Apparate. He willed himself and Ginny there...

...and it was dark outside the Hogwarts gates; Harry could only see a little light from the castle and from Hogsmeade. He gently put Ginny down, but was still supporting her, as she was shaken from her ordeal. As he did so, he heard two pops, and Cassandra and Tonks suddenly Apparated a few feet away.

"Harry! Ginny! How... where did you Disapparate from?" asked Cassandra, bewildered.

"We were in the Chamber of Secrets, it's a long story," he said, as their eyebrows went high. "I have to get her inside, she's been through a lot."

Cassandra and Tonks exchanged a glance. "Harry," Tonks asked, "that walk we took in December, what were we doing, and what did I say was most important?"

Harry looked puzzled at the non sequitur, but then realized why she was asking. "You were holding my hand, and you said, 'the girl is always right.'"

Tonks nodded. "Sorry, Harry, you can't be too careful. Let's go." They opened the Hogwarts gates. Tonks helped support Ginny as they made their way up to the castle entrance.

They were greeted by a group of Gryffindor and Slytherin first years. "Professor! You're okay!" A few went running off. "Yes, I'm okay," he said. "But we need to get her to the infirmary."

"I'll be all right, Harry," said Ginny. "I just need to relax a little. I didn't get to be held for as long as I should have been."

"I'm sure someone will help you out," he assured her.

They entered the infirmary a few minutes later. Harry saw Dumbledore, Snape, McGonagall, and Madam Pomfrey standing at one end of the room. Ron, Neville, and Hermione were sitting near Pansy's bed. "Ginny!" Ron shouted, leaping up out of his chair. He ran to her and hugged her. "We were really worried." To Harry, he said, "After you and Hermione left, we three started running back to the castle, and halfway there, Ginny just disappeared. We were scared, because we knew it must have something to do with Malfoy." Hermione and Neville hugged Ginny as Ron talked.

"Let's get you to a bed," said Madam Pomfrey, taking Ginny and steering her to the beds. Ginny saw Pansy, and gasped. "What happened?" she asked.

"She wasn't able to say very much," said Hermione, "she lost a fair amount of blood. Malfoy cut her stomach, and used the Curse on her, is what we know for sure. Fortunately, the cut wasn't that deep, so while it looked bad, there was only minor damage to her internal organs. Madam Pomfrey says she'll be okay in a couple of

days. He did the Curse on you, didn't he, Ginny? There was a passage from Pansy's dormitory, we could hear you screaming..."

Ginny sat, nodding. "I'd like to borrow Neville for a few minutes, if you wouldn't mind." Neville sat next to her and held her.

Professor Dumbledore approached, the other two teachers behind him. "Harry, I am very glad that you and Ginny are all right. I would very much like to know what happened."

"It's probably just easier if I let you see it," Harry said. "You'll want to anyway. Tonks and Cassandra should too."

Dumbledore nodded and left to get the Pensieve. Harry approached Pansy's bed, but was stopped by Madam Pomfrey. "Professor, I've been very indulgent in allowing so many people to tromp through the infirmary, but she needs sleep. You must not touch her, or speak too loudly."

Harry nodded, and kept his distance from Pansy's bed, much as he wanted to sit next to it and wait for her to get better. A minute later, Dumbledore returned with the Pensieve, and Harry put his memories into it. "Harry, Ginny," said Hermione. "Do you mind if-"

"No, it's fine," said Harry, as Ginny nodded. "Neville, I'll hold her, I don't need to see it again." Neville patted Ginny one more time and got up, Harry taking his place. The three professors, two Aurors, and three friends of Harry's put their fingers into the Pensieve. Harry and Ginny were alone, except for Madam Pomfrey, who was across the infirmary from them.

As Harry held her, Ginny said, "They're going to come out of that thing looking like I did, like they can't believe it. This is big, Harry. Really, really big." She drew back so she could see his face, and gave him a teasing smile. "You're going to be famous."

Harry laughed, trying to keep it down so as not to anger Madam Pomfrey. "And you know how I've always wanted to be famous." He paused, then said, "I was so proud of you for not saying anything when Malfoy talked to you, at the end there."

She shook her head. "It was so obvious he was lying. He just wanted some satisfaction. I enjoyed how you didn't give him any. Well, as much as you can enjoy anything after suffering that Curse. Oh, it's so horrible. Funny, now Ron's the only one of the six of us who's never had it."

"Let's hope it stays that way," said Harry, to which Ginny nodded fervently. "Poor Pansy," said Ginny, "she didn't have anybody to hold her after she got it. She just got stabbed instead. I feel bad for me, but I feel worse for her."

Harry couldn't think of anything to say to that except to agree, and just continued holding her. After a minute, she said, "The Aurors are going to be

desperate to learn that spell, the newest one," she clarified. "We're going to have to give them names. But can you imagine what that would mean to an Auror? How much safer it would make them? I assume that's why you told Tonks and Cassandra to go in."

"Yes, that was why. I don't know if they're going to have any better luck learning this one than the other one, but I hope they can. I wondered if maybe they could see something that would help them."

"I hope so," she said, moving out of the embrace but keeping an arm around him. "I don't know what it would be, but you never know."

A minute later, the eight people in the Pensieve stepped out, and started to approach them. As Ginny had suggested, their faces registered mainly awe.

"Well, Harry, I hardly know where to begin," said Dumbledore with what Harry would have assumed was amusement if the situation had been different. "It is as though we must now take what we understood to be true of what wizards are capable of, throw it out, and start again."

"I just want the Aurors to be able to use it," he said.

"We want to too, Harry," said Cassandra. "But this has staggering implications, even more than the other one."

Looking a little pale, Ron stepped forward. "I don't know about the implications. I'm just glad the both of you are still alive." He sat next to Ginny, and put an arm around her.

Neville nodded. "I thought you were done for, Harry, and this was even knowing that you ended up alive." Harry and his friends chuckled.

"I also liked," added Ron, "how in the face of death, you made sure to annoy Malfoy."

Harry nodded. "Just didn't see any point in indulging him. It's always been a waste of time to talk to him anyway. Especially after what he'd done, I wasn't in the mood to banter." He glanced over at Pansy.

"You kept your temper, I'll say that," said Hermione. "Thank you, Harry," she added, kissing him on the cheek, "for saving two good friends of mine."

"Harry, may the Aurors and I have a word with you?" asked Dumbledore. Harry walked over to the other side of the room, while Hermione, Neville, and Ron talked to Ginny.

Harry stood opposite Dumbledore, with Tonks and Cassandra on either side. "Harry, what is almost as stunning as the newest spell is that you were able to Disapparate out of there," said Dumbledore.

Harry frowned in confusion. "But obviously I was right, that the Chamber of Secrets is underground, and therefore..." He stopped as Dumbledore shook his head.

"The anti-Disapparation field which protects Hogwarts is not only extremely powerful and old, but extends above and below the surface of the ground. The Chamber of Secrets is included in the area from which it should be impossible to Disapparate."

"But that's not possible..." Harry trailed off.

"Neither was stopping a Killing Curse, until tonight," pointed out Cassandra.

"How could I have done that?" asked Harry.

"Harry," said Dumbledore gently, "this is speculation, but it is informed speculation. We have discussed the fact that using the energy of love as a basis for your magic makes you powerful. Without wishing to intrude, it was impossible not to notice, just before you Disapparated, how you were looking at Ginny, and she at you. I strongly suspect that at that moment you were more powerful than Voldemort, more powerful than myself. I have tried to Disapparate from the Hogwarts grounds, and I cannot. You chose to Apparate outside the Hogwarts gate because you thought you could not Apparate inside. I think if you had tried to Apparate into the infirmary, you would have done so."

"I don't know what to say," said Harry. "I'm as surprised as you are."

"Well, we should digest this information, and discuss it tomorrow. Perhaps we should leave the young people alone," Dumbledore said to the others. He headed out, followed by the other two teachers, and one of the Aurors. Tonks stayed behind and moved him over to the other end of the infirmary from his friends.

"Harry, you have to tell her," said Tonks urgently, keeping her voice down.

"Tell who what?" Harry asked, confused.

Tonks sighed. "Ginny. You're in love with her, and she is with you. I don't know if you realized when you let us see that, but it was completely obvious. It had to be one of the most emotional moments of your life, and you didn't care if we saw it. You're really something sometimes. But you have to tell her."

Harry closed his eyes. "I don't know if I can, Tonks."

She nodded. "I know you're scared. I can understand-"

"She almost died just because she's the person I love most! That's exactly what scares me so much!" Harry whispered.

"I know," she said sympathetically. "But like a lot of other things in your life, you're stuck with it. She knows. She may deny it to herself until you tell her, but her heart knows, and every day you don't tell her will be a rejection. The reasons won't matter. The fact is that you're in love with her and she with you. If you want to not hurt her, you have to tell her. I'm really sorry, but it's that simple."

Harry looked down. "I believe you, but... I feel like I can't bear doing either one."

Tonks pulled him closer, her face inches from his. "Harry," she said, gripping his shoulders, "look at what the energy of love did just now. Embrace that energy, Harry. Not just as a concept, but in your life. You deserve it for yourself, and for her. What she said, about even if you starve, it'd at least be together... she meant that, and it meant that she'd rather have a few days of love with you than a lifetime without it. Don't deprive her of that, or yourself." She kissed him on the forehead, and left the infirmary.

Harry stood there alone for a moment, lost in thought. He knew Tonks was right, but it was getting up the courage to do something about it that was the problem. So, there was only one thing to do.

He walked over to Ginny's bed, and gestured to Ron a request that he get up so Harry could sit next to Ginny; Ron did so. Madam Pomfrey seemed to have left the infirmary, so he knew he wouldn't be interrupted. "Have you ever just gone ahead and done something because you didn't think you'd have the courage to do it later?" he asked, looking at Ginny.

Ron didn't seem to notice, because he answered. "Sure, I suppose all of us have, but I don't see what that has to do with-

"Sssshh, Ron!" whispered Hermione. Ron looked at her quizzically.

Not caring that three other people were watching, Harry plowed ahead. "Ginny, I'm in love with you." He said nothing else; suddenly, nothing was as important as her reaction.

She looked dumbfounded, as did Ron and Neville. Hermione smiled joyously and gave a squeak of pleasure, but kept herself in check otherwise. Finally Ginny said, "I thought that you were scared-

"I am," he interrupted, his voice heavy with emotion. "I've never been so scared of anything in my life. You saw what almost happened tonight. I didn't even know, consciously, that I felt this way, and even that almost got you killed. But after he'd gone, and I looked at you, I just suddenly realized I felt this way. And I'm afraid if I don't say it now, then I never will, so I'm saying it. I just hope you feel the same way."

"Are you kidding?" she asked incredulously. "Do you know how long I've wanted... hoped for..." Tears came to her eyes, and she reached out to put her hands on his shoulders, her face against his, almost nose to nose. "And this isn't just as a stupid ten-year-old, this is this year, last year... I was happy to be your friend, I just never thought I had a chance. I thought I saw it in your eyes back there, but I was afraid I was wrong, or that you'd be too scared... Harry, I love you, and I've been in

love with you for a long time. There's nothing I want more than this, and I'll take any risk there is to do it."

Hermione was now crying freely, and Ron and Neville looked very happy. Harry felt tears of happiness coming on, and reflexively tried to stop them, though he didn't care if the others saw him cry. "Oh, Ginny," he said, "I'm sorry I didn't realize it until now. I mean, I sort of knew, but I think I tried to push it down. It was just... something I felt like I couldn't have. I just... anyway, I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry, Harry. Look at me." He did, and love shone from her eyes in a way that he could never have imagined until he saw it. She gently touched his cheek. "Do I look like you should be apologizing to me, for anything?"

He didn't answer, but looked back at her, hoping his feelings showed in his eyes. Ginny smiled brilliantly, her face already close to his. She leaned in a little more and kissed him gently and quickly on the lips, as if not to startle him. She looked at him, smiling, her eyes asking, 'was that okay?' He smiled in response, and she kissed him again, more firmly, for a few seconds. He hoped he was doing it all right; he had no idea, but she seemed pleased enough. They broke apart, their faces still close, and smiled at each other. "I suddenly feel," he said, "like I'd like to do a lot more of that."

"As soon as you want, I'll show you the places on the map," said Hermione happily.

Harry leaned forward and rested his head on her shoulder, his arms around her. "I'm so happy," he whispered. "Me too," she whispered back. He glanced up to see Hermione happier than he'd ever seen her; he wondered if they hadn't quite whispered quietly enough.

Ginny pulled back enough to look into his eyes. "Harry," she said, "I admire you so much for doing this even though you were really scared. But I want you to try not to be. This is the best feeling in the world, this is what life is all about. We have to dive into it, and not think about what could happen." She smiled. "Besides, now that you're in love, your magic will be even stronger."

"Dumbledore thinks that's what happened, actually," he said. He related the conversation he'd had, and the others shook their heads.

"It's still amazing what you did," said Hermione. "But I saw, I think we all saw, that look you exchanged before you Disapparated. It wouldn't surprise me at all."

"That's true," said Ron. "Even I, who's supposed to be emotionally stunted, could see-"

"Stop saying that, Ron, you'll make me feel bad," Hermione admonished him. "Besides, you're getting better."

Ron grinned, though whether it was at her comment or having annoyed her, Harry couldn't tell. "Anyway, that look after Malfoy left... I couldn't mistake that, either. Oh, Ginny, can you imagine Mum's reaction to this?"

Ginny laughed. "She'll be in heaven. This is what she's always wanted."

"Really?" Harry asked. He hadn't known that.

"She's constantly hinted around about it," said Ginny. "It's not like I needed her encouragement, but she did it anyway. Harry, she doesn't think about the danger, not even after Percy. She loves us both, and what mother doesn't want the best possible man for her daughter? Never mind the accomplishments, but the qualities that got you chosen by Fawkes are ones she's known about for a long time, it's why she loves you so much. She'll be ecstatic. Dad'll be happy too, mind you, but we have to tell her soon. This'll give her something good to think about, you know she's still mourning Percy pretty strongly."

"Too bad vacation just ended," Harry agreed. "When can we tell her?"

"You could tell them, Harry," Hermione pointed out. "You're a teacher, you should be able to come and go as you like."

"I hadn't thought of that," Harry admitted. "But I'd really like to tell them with both of us there. Do you think Dumbledore would give special permission for a quick trip for both of us?"

"Hard to say, he might have security issues," said Ron. "Well, talk to him, anyway, and see what he says. Be sure to mention the cheering-her-up angle."

Harry laughed; the others looked at him inquiringly. "I was just thinking, there were three attempts on my life today, but I'm happier than I've ever been in my life. I knew love was powerful, but..."

Ginny smiled. "If it can do that, I guess we shouldn't be shocked that it can beat the Killing Curse." She reached forward to hug Harry again. "Harry, you have no idea how happy you've made me... this feeling, it's just... Hermione, where were those places again?"

Everyone laughed, Ginny still hugging Harry, as Madam Pomfrey walked into the infirmary. Glancing at them, she said, "I'd say the young lady has had enough recuperation," referring to the hugging. She leaned over to check Pansy.

Ginny whispered to Harry, "You can never have too much recuperation." He giggled, trying not to laugh out loud and further annoy Madam Pomfrey. Not taking her eyes off of Pansy, Madam Pomfrey said, "That was my way of saying that you all should be going now, if you didn't catch my drift."

"We'd really like to stay here and wait with her," said Harry.

"One of you can stay," she conceded. "Not all of you."

"I'll be the one to stay," said Ron. "You two couples go on ahead, look at maps, and stuff."

The others smiled and nodded. Harry stopped by Pansy's bed. "Get better soon, Pansy," he whispered. The others offered similar sentiments as they headed out. Ron pulled up a chair as they left, Neville and Hermione arm in arm, followed by Harry and Ginny, arm in arm as well.

Outside the portrait hole, Harry suddenly changed his mind about going to Gryffindor Tower. "I'm going to Dumbledore's office, to talk to him about the thing about your parents," he told Ginny. Taking a quick look up and down the hall and seeing no one other than Hermione and Neville, he moved in for a quick kiss before heading off. He knew they couldn't be doing that in public, but the novelty and the excitement were exhilarating. He walked off towards Dumbledore's office.

He knocked on the door, which opened, and he walked in. Tonks and Cassandra were standing; apparently they had been on their way out. He greeted them, which seemed to give them more than enough information. Tonks grinned. "You told her, didn't you? It's all over your face." Harry smiled broadly, which came naturally to him right then. Tonks made a sound of delight. "All right, Harry! You did it!"

He looked at her earnestly. "Seriously, Tonks, it's thanks to you, what you said. I just made up my mind to go over and do it. I don't think I would have otherwise."

"She was very happy, I assume," said Cassandra.

"Yes, she was," said Harry. "It was just the reaction you hope for when you tell someone you're in love with them, I would imagine."

They congratulated him, said goodbye, and left. Dumbledore looked up at Harry. "I believe, Harry, that I have never seen you anywhere near as happy as you are right now. It gives me great pleasure."

"Thank you, sir. I had never imagined what this felt like. It's ironic, since I've been using the energy of love for my spells, but only now do I realize what it feels like when it's as strong as this. Ginny was saying, no wonder it can defeat the Killing Curse."

"Indeed. What is also ironic is that had Malfoy not used that particular device to attempt to lure you to your doom, you probably would not have discovered what you have now discovered."

"Yes, sir. Particularly since how it works is exactly why I was so reluctant in the first place. What I wanted to ask you, sir, was about how soon I can meet the Weasleys to tell them this. Ron and Ginny have told me that Molly has been hoping for this, and I'd like to give her some good news for a change."

Dumbledore looked at him affectionately. "That is very thoughtful, Harry. I am pleased to be able to tell you that I contacted them after Ginny went missing. They are en route, and should be here any time now."

"That's great, sir. I'll go get Ginny. Where should we meet them?"

"I believe the staff room should be available, as the hour is late. I will escort them there when they arrive. You and Ginny should go straight there."

"Thank you, sir." He left Dumbledore's office and headed back to Gryffindor Tower. He felt as though he wanted to run, he had so much energy. Now this is really the energy of love, he thought.

He walked up to the portrait of the Fat Lady. "Fish and chips," he said, and he climbed in. He was immediately accosted by some first years wanting to hear his account of what had happened. "I'm sorry, I can't, there's people waiting for us. Ginny," he shouted. She ran over. "Your parents are on the way, they'll be here any time." They climbed out again, and walked toward the staff room, hand in hand.

"Harry," she said, "would you believe me if I told you that you were only gone for ten minutes, but I missed you?"

He grinned. "Yes, I would. I feel like I don't want to do anything else but be with you. Now I really wish this had happened before vacation."

"Well, look on the bright side, Harry, that it happened at all. You would have gone on for who knows how long, a few years maybe, never letting yourself feel like this. I'm just so glad that didn't happen."

"I see what you mean. I could easily imagine that happening. It's almost scary now to think about that."

"Well, we don't have to think about it if we don't want to, since it didn't happen," she said happily. "Where are we going?"

"The staff room," he answered.

"Too bad Hermione's not here, she's always wanted to go in there," joked Ginny. Looking at him as they walked, she asked, "So, you felt this way, but you didn't know?"

He thought for a few seconds. "I'm not sure... like I said, I just felt like it was something I couldn't have. If I ever started thinking about it, the fear would take over, and it made me stop. But I think in some way, I knew. It's kind of hard to explain."

She put her arm around his waist as they walked, and squeezed him. "I'm sorry, Harry. That must have been really hard. I know you must still be scared. But I'm serious, even if something happened to one of us tomorrow, I'd never regret this. Some things are so good they're worth taking risks for, and this is definitely one. If you feel anything like I do, you'll know that's true."

"Before this happened, I'm not sure I would have believed that," he answered. "But feeling the way I feel right now, I know you're right. I'm still scared, but I'm glad I did this. I wouldn't take it back even if I could. I never imagined that it felt like this." She squeezed him again as they approached the staff room.

They walked in, and Arthur and Molly were standing in the middle of the room, talking to Dumbledore. "Harry! Ginny!" exclaimed Molly, rushing toward them, hugging them both at once, one with each arm. "Oh, thank goodness you're all right. Now, what happened?"

Dumbledore excused himself, and Harry started telling the story. Molly reacted very strongly to it, gasping when he told her what had happened to Pansy, about Ginny undergoing the Cruciatus Curse, and upon hearing how he was held in place by Malfoy. Harry discovered that when he took out everything Malfoy said, the story didn't take that long to tell. When Harry got to the part about the newest spell, their jaws dropped, and they were speechless. Finally Arthur said, "I was wondering how you could have gotten out of that... amazing... but how did you even get out of the Chamber?"

"I Disapparated out, and carried Ginny."

"But you can't Disapparate out of anyplace in Hogwarts," pointed out Arthur.

"I thought the Chamber might be different, since it was underground. So I tried, and it worked. It was only afterwards that I found out that I shouldn't have been able to do it."

Again, the Weasleys looked stunned. "So, how did you do it?" asked Molly.

"Well, that brings us to the best part of the story," said Ginny, obviously relishing the anticipation of her mother's reaction. "You see, something else happened that's even better than Harry finding a shield for the Killing Curse."

Both Weasleys raised their eyebrows. "This ought to be good," mused Arthur.

"Something about what happened down there, I'm not sure what it was," explained Harry, "but... after I knew Ginny was safe, and I hugged her and looked at her, something just clicked... and I realized that I was in love with her. After we got back to the infirmary, I told her." Ginny's beaming face provided its own commentary.

Molly let out a high-pitched squeal of joy, and reached out and hugged Ginny hard, causing her to gasp for breath. After a few seconds, she did the same with Harry. Then she hugged her husband, who just smiled. "That's wonderful," he said. "We're really very happy for you." He paused, then added, "At least I am, I can't speak for Molly." She lightly and playfully hit his arm, as Harry and Ginny laughed.

"Oh, my, I'm so happy I can barely say anything," said Molly, still ecstatic. "It's so wonderful... Ginny, how do you feel?"

She just smiled at her mother and, instead of answering, turned to Harry and planted a firm kiss on his lips. After five seconds, she released him. He felt a bit dazed, but happy. "That should answer your question," said Ginny.

"It does," said her beaming mother. "You know there are places you can go to be alone, right?"

Harry was taken slightly aback at a girl's mother suggesting such a thing, but then he thought, most girls' mothers aren't quite this happy at their daughter's choice of a boyfriend. "Yes, Mum, Hermione said she'll tell us where they all are," said Ginny. "The only problem, of course, is that Harry's so busy. Saturdays with the Aurors, him and Neville teaching us what they learn from them, homework, teaching... we won't have as much time as most students. But I'll take what time with him that I can get."

"You'll get all I can give you, believe me," said Harry. Molly beamed again and rubbed Harry's head.

"Not to get off the subject, because this is really terrific," said Arthur, "but what does it have to do with Disapparating out of the Chamber of Secrets?"

"Well, you know that I've gotten used to using the energy of love for all my magic now," explained Harry. "Just before I Disapparated, I looked at her, and felt this powerful feeling of love, more than I had ever felt. Professor Dumbledore thinks that was what got us out of there, that it made my magic that powerful. He said he can't do what I did."

Molly and Arthur looked amazed again. "Yeah, I know, I kind of feel that way myself," agreed Harry. "But right now, I'm much happier about Ginny than I am about that, or the new shield."

"You sweet boy," said Molly fondly, touching his face. "Oh, my... we came out here just hoping there wouldn't be a disaster, and we find out this... this is just so wonderful, we love you both so much..."

"I'm really glad, Molly," said Harry. "I didn't know you'd feel this way. I would have thought you'd be concerned about the extra danger it brings to Ginny."

She looked at him sadly, though still very happy. "Harry, you have to understand, I love you as much as I love the children I gave birth to. I'm always concerned about the danger you're in, and it endangered Ron and Ginny anyway. She won't be in that much more danger by being the girl you love. Yes, I'm concerned, but I would never let it affect how I feel about this. You two are so good for each other, you both love so well..." Molly was practically swooning. "There's going to be wonderful grandchildren from this, I can feel it."

"I was wondering how long after we told her it was going to take before we heard the word 'grandchildren,'" joked Ginny.

"Molly, she's only fifteen," pointed out Arthur. "You don't want to go giving her ideas."

"I already have ideas," Ginny said, raising her eyebrows and grinning at Harry. "Don't worry, Dad, I'm not in a hurry for children. But I know what Mum means, just eventually. I know Mum, tomorrow she'll be picking out wedding patterns."

"I will not," said Molly unconvincingly. Arthur chuckled.

Harry looked at Ginny. "She might as well. The way I feel isn't going to change. I'm sure of that." He knew as he said it that he was saying a lot, but he also knew that even though he said it impulsively, it was how he felt, and he didn't regret saying it.

Ginny looked at him with boundless love, and hugged him, her eyes starting to tear up. Molly's were as well. Ginny held his shoulders and said, "I love you so much, Harry... I feel like there's so much I want to say, but I just don't have the words."

He nodded. "I know what you mean, I felt that way earlier. It's just... an amazing feeling."

Arthur took a step toward them. "You know we're both thrilled for you, and Harry, I know you mean what you say. I'm sure I said the same thing to Molly thirty-two years ago; when we fell in love, we were about the same ages you are now. But I'm the practical one, so I want to give you both some practical advice. There are dangers and problems in any relationship, no matter how happy, so I want to give you some warning of the most common ones.

"The most important thing is to always talk, always communicate. If you're unhappy about something to do with the other person, you'll want to not say anything, so you don't upset them. But believe me, you pay a price in the end for that. You'll store up resentments and unhappiness, and it'll be harder to deal with later on. You always have to say when something's bothering you, even if it seems irrational, and the other person has to respect that person's feelings. If you don't, it'll be that much harder, eventually."

"Believe me, we know," added Molly. "We have a lot of hard-earned experience. We just hope it can be less hard for you."

Harry and Ginny nodded, both serious now. Harry was trying to digest this; he was barely used to the idea of being in a relationship, so it was all a bit much.

"A lot of men, Harry, have the problem of at times not being attentive or thoughtful enough," continued Arthur. "It kind of seems like that may not be such a problem for you. I hope that's the case. But you may have to be especially cognizant of Ginny's feelings, because this may be harder for her than for you at times, for the same reasons that sometimes you don't like being Harry Potter."

"How do you mean, Dad?" asked Ginny.

"Well, Ginny, you have gotten yourself-and I don't mean to embarrass you, Harry, I'm just trying to state an objective truth-the most desirable boy in your age range in the entire wizarding world." Harry tried, not very successfully, not to be embarrassed as Ginny and Molly smiled at him. "Good as that is, there will be drawbacks. He's going to get a lot of attention from people, many of whom he doesn't know, and he has to be polite and attentive to that, since he's so famous, and now a public person. You're going to feel like there are too many people tugging at him. He's still going to get attention from women, even though they'll know he's taken. I can't imagine there won't be times when you'll feel jealous, if not of a specific woman, then just anybody who puts a demand on Harry's time. That's going to be hard for you, and Harry, you need to recognize that, and try to be understanding of it, if she acts put out by it at times."

Molly raised her eyebrows. "This is, of course, from Arthur's long experience of being highly popular, sought after by many women, demands on his time..."

"And thank goodness for that," he replied, accepting her joke well. "I wouldn't want the celebrity thing any more than Harry does. But, as he knows, he's stuck with it, and now Ginny is too. Honey, you're going to start seeing your name in the Prophet, and it won't always be complimentary."

She nodded. "I already knew that, from Harry's experience last year. But they can say anything they want about me, I don't care as long as I have him."

"I know that's true. I'm just saying, it won't be easy at times."

"I was just thinking," recalled Harry, "when Tonks talked to me about girlfriends, she said the most important thing to remember is, 'the girl as always right.'"

The others chuckled. "Not always, I would argue," said Arthur. "More than half the time, definitely. I think women are just naturally better at relationships than men. It's possible that Tonks meant that even if the girl seems to you to be wrong, you can't dismiss it, you have to realize she could be right even if it seems impossible to you that she is. Or, to put it another way, her feelings are never wrong, they just are. You can never say 'you shouldn't feel that way,' because she does, and can't help it."

"Yes, that phrase is a big danger sign," agreed Molly. "Another one is, if one of you says, 'I don't want to talk about it,' that's exactly the time to talk about it. That's where relationships can be hard. You do things you find very hard to do, because you love the other person and don't want to cause them pain. That's very basic, but also hard at times. If you love someone and they're in pain, you do everything you can to help them. If you do that, you can deal with whatever comes along."

"I'm pretty sure I can do that," said Harry.

Looking into his eyes, Ginny said, "There's nothing I wouldn't do for you, Harry. If you're in pain for any reason, whether or not it has to do with me, I want to know. Please don't ever keep what you're going through from me, even if you mean to protect me."

"I'll try," he said, though knowing he would want to protect her.

"Oh, and one other thing," added Arthur. "Revel in this feeling you have now, enjoy it for all it's worth. I don't mean stop studying, but just stop frequently to appreciate it, and each other. I didn't mean to depress you with all this serious advice, like this is some chore you have to start working at. It should be joyful, and it will be. I just want to save you some pain if I can."

"Well, we should get back home now, we know you can't be out of Gryffindor Tower past a certain time." Molly hugged Harry, saying, "It's not only Ginny you've made very happy, Harry." She then hugged Ginny, whispering something to her which caused her to giggle. Molly and Arthur said goodbye and left the staff room.

Harry and Ginny stayed for a moment. "Can you tell me what she whispered to you?" Harry asked.

Ginny giggled again. Because they were alone, she leaned over and gave him a long kiss. They both smiled, then she answered his question. "She said that her and Dad's favorite spot was near the lake, behind some bushes against the castle wall."

Harry chuckled. "Boy, will I get teased in here tomorrow. John and Flitwick, I imagine, will have a lot of fun with me, and McGonagall will probably have a comment. They'll be impressed about the other thing, and they'll say that, too, but it'll mainly be about you."

They left the staff room. "You like it that they do that, don't you?"

"Of course; they do it because they like me, and it's all in fun. They often have a go at each other. Except Snape, of course. But one reason I like getting teased is it means I can do it to them, too. I usually don't, but I do if I think of something good. It's just very comfortable."

"I'm glad, Harry. You're just a likable person."

He put an arm around her. "Just so long as you keep liking me."

"Not much danger of that stopping," she assured him.

Back in Gryffindor Tower, they were greeted with more questions, which Harry now had time to answer, Ginny at his side. He, and they, were congratulated by many, which seemed to please Ginny even more than Harry. "I'm not used to being the center of attention, like you are," she said at one point.

"Better get used to it," he replied.

Finally they sat with Neville and Hermione, who they told about the conversation with the Weasleys. Hermione, still in a state of high excitement, asked for their maps, and ran off to her dormitory. When she got back, she returned their maps to them.

"A little modification I made for mine when Neville and I got together," she explained. "You know how I set yours to sound an alarm if Crabbe or Malfoy got anywhere near you? I had already made a similar one on mine; I changed mine so that it could be set to make a soft beeping noise if anyone got to within ten yards of us. It was very useful in certain situations, situations which I think you'll be finding yourself in too."

Ginny told them what her mother had whispered, and they chuckled. "Yes, that's a good one," Hermione agreed. "Here, I'll show you the others."

She laid the map out in front of them, making sure no one else could see. They no longer needed them for defense, thought Harry, but it was good to put them to another, happier use.

Harry and Neville left their dormitory a little early the next morning; Ron had not come back. Harry wondered if Ron's status as a prefect had anything to do with Madam Pomfrey not throwing him out of the infirmary. Ginny and Hermione were waiting for them in the common room. Harry knew he had to get used to the idea that they couldn't be too physically affectionate in places like the common room or the halls, but he had to think to stop himself from kissing Ginny anyway. They settled for exchanging very happy looks.

They had decided the night before to stop by the infirmary before breakfast to see how Pansy was doing. As they entered, Harry saw Ron and Pansy talking, Ron holding Pansy's hand. When Ron saw them, he put it down quickly, and stood up to greet them.

"She's doing a lot better," said Ron. "Still can't get up, and shouldn't, but Madam Pomfrey says she should only have to spend one more night here, then she can leave."

"It's so good to see you all, thank you for coming by like this, as soon as you could," said Pansy.

"We would have all stayed the night if Madam Pomfrey had let us," Hermione assured her. "When did you wake up?"

"At about three o'clock," said Pansy. "Ron was still awake, but he looked tired. He kept saying he wasn't tired, but he was really lying."

As the others laughed, Ron said, "Well, once you woke up I wasn't tired. I had someone to talk to."

She smiled and took his hand again. "He was just paying me back for that night I spent talking to him last month."

Ron looked embarrassed to have his hand held in front of the others. "I would have done it anyway," he said.

Harry sat down on the other side of the bed from Ron. "Pansy, I'm so sorry that happened. We shouldn't have left you alone, we would have been better off making sure the whole school knew, and looked out for you. We should have had protection in your dormitory-"

She cut him off. "Harry, you can't think like that, you can't blame yourself for everything. Dumbledore thought it was okay, everyone did except you. I never expected him to come after me, only you. It's the chance I took. It's easy to see this kind of thing in retrospect. It was awful, I admit, but I'm okay now. I don't regret anything, and if I had to suffer, I'm proud of the reason it happened." Harry was very proud of her, but still distressed at what she had suffered for him. Seeing this, she changed the subject. "Ron told me about you two, I'm so happy for you. He described what happened here last night, I spent a half hour pressing him for every little detail. You haven't lived until you've tried to get Ron to describe a touching emotional scene in full detail."

The others laughed again, and even Ron couldn't keep a grin off his face. "It wasn't that bad," he admonished her. "I'm going to have to take lessons from Harry on how to get rid of this reputation I have."

"All you have to do is watch him, Ron," teased Ginny. "That's all the lesson you'll need."

Pansy, Neville, and Hermione laughed. "That was pretty good, Ginny," said Pansy. "You managed to tease both of them-Ron for his discomfort with emotion, and Harry for his modesty-with one comment." Then she said, "Seriously, it's wonderful. I know you'll be really happy together."

"You should have seen them after we left the infirmary," said a smiling Hermione. "They were both so giddy. It was like they had been given too many Cheering Charms."

Ginny shook her head. "No Cheering Charm could have made me as happy as I was last night, as happy as I am now."

They all talked for another ten minutes. All five, including Ron, were going to go to breakfast, but Pansy asked Harry to stay back, and he did, after exchanging a goodbye glance with Ginny. As they left, Harry heard Ron asking Hermione if she could whip him up a potion that would keep him awake all day. Harry imagined that she would give him a lecture on not depending on potions for that kind of thing, then do it anyway.

"You're still giddy, Harry," Pansy said. "It really suits you."

"Thanks," he replied, glad that she was happy for him. "Should we be expecting any announcements about you and Ron anytime soon?"

"Why do you say that?"

"He dropped your hand a little too fast when we came in," Harry explained. "If he was just doing it as a friend, like he might for Hermione, he wouldn't have cared what we saw when we came in."

"Very perceptive, Harry. I don't know... I can tell he likes me, and I think it may be in that way. I'm just not sure. I'll ask Hermione later, she knows him better than me. But considering how un-expressive he's supposed to be, he's been fairly expressive. Who knows, maybe he's just trying to be different with me. Maybe he was being extra nice because of what happened to me, or my spending the night talking to him after Percy died. It's hard to say. I don't think he's just going to come out and say 'I'm in love with you' like you did with Ginny. That was pretty impressive."

"It's like jumping into a pool not knowing whether it's warm or cold, you just have to decide to do it," Harry said. "I knew I had a good chance of a positive reaction; the hardest thing was getting past my fears. You know how I worry," he joked. "Still, I was really nervous. So how are you on Ron?"

"I really like him, of course. I think I need to spend more time with him to be sure, in more normal situations, but I really like what I've seen. We'll just have to see how it goes. I know the rest of you will be trying to push us together."

Harry smiled. "I'd be very happy to see it, of course. And Hermione would love it. She and you could gang up on teasing Ron. I think she noticed the thing with the hand like I did; I hope she doesn't tease him about it."

"I don't think she will, Harry. I think she knows what to tease him about and what not to." She looked at him seriously. "I asked you to stay back because there's something I want you to do for me. I think it's something you're not going to want to do, and I wouldn't blame you."

Harry was surprised she would say such a thing, after what she had done for him. "Pansy, there's literally nothing I wouldn't do for you. Just ask."

She gestured to the Pensieve two yards away. "Professor Dumbledore must have left that there from last night. I want to put my memory of what happened yesterday in there. I want you to see it."

Now Harry understood why she had said he wouldn't want to do as she asked, but he knew he couldn't refuse her anything. He nodded somberly. "Of course, I'll do it. I am curious as to why, though."

She nodded. "I know, but it'll be easier to explain after you've seen it; you may even know without my telling you."

He moved the Pensieve over closer to the bed, and told her how to move her memories over. She did, and he put a finger inside.

He was standing in Pansy's dormitory; she was alone. She was putting something away in her trunk. She turned around and gave a start as Malfoy suddenly appeared in front of her, out of nowhere.

"Draco!" she gasped, slipping into her acting mode, Harry could tell. "What are you doing here? How did you-"

Unfortunately, Malfoy wasn't buying it. "Shut up, you lying bitch!" he said quietly, with fury, as he Silenced her with his wand. "If you scream when I lift the Silencing, I'll kill you immediately. You have one chance to tell me the truth. Why did you betray me?"

"Draco, I don't know what you're-"

He Silenced her again. "Wrong answer, Pansy. Crucio!"

She screamed silently and collapsed, writhing uncontrollably. Harry wanted to look away, but didn't, out of respect for what Pansy had done, and suffered. It was very painful for him to watch, even as a memory that he knew was long over. But not long for her, he imagined. He felt he understood why she wanted him to see it; she would live with this for the rest of her life, and she wanted someone else to know exactly what she had been through. He was a little surprised she hadn't chosen Ron, however.

She screamed in agony for what Harry guessed was about fifteen seconds before Malfoy stopped it and lifted the Silencing again. She breathed heavily and whimpered, still in shock. Pitiless, Malfoy knelt and leaned over her.

"I know what you did. Why did you do it?"

She took another few seconds to recover, then looked up. Now, her expression was defiant. "For him," she said.

Harry's name had not yet been spoken, but it was clear to Malfoy who she meant. He looked outraged and stunned. "You... you let me... touch you... to save him?"

Harry cringed. Oh, my God, I did not want to know that, he thought. Then he was immediately ashamed of himself for the thought. If she can suffer it, the least I can do is know about it if she wants me to, he told himself. But he was still terribly pained at the thought of what she had done.

Pansy nodded. "Why?" asked Malfoy quietly.

"I love him," said Pansy. "He's noble, brave, kind, and selfless. He suffered terribly to help all wizards everywhere. And he's right, you can't possibly understand

it, you'll tell yourself some lie to make yourself feel strong. He'll beat Voldemort one day, and I wanted to make sure he stayed alive to get the chance."

Fury reasserted itself as the dominant feature on Malfoy's face. He Silenced her again, and again said "Crucio!"

Pansy screamed noiselessly again, pain and terror on her face. Malfoy kept it going for a good deal longer this time; Harry was sure it was longer than a minute. As it continued, Harry recalled how Neville had felt last night; even though he knew Pansy was fine, right then, he feared for her sanity. He wondered how long it took before that became a risk. His memories of how it felt came flooding back, and it had lasted far less long for him.

Finally, it stopped. Pansy gasped and lay limp, unmoving, eyes glazed. "Still want to sing his praises? Tempt me, and I'll send you the way of Longbottom's parents. Go on, say some more nice things about him."

Pansy looked very afraid, which Harry could positively understand. She said nothing.

"Well, I guess you're not so stupid as to let yourself get tortured when you can help it, unlike your hero," Malfoy sneered. "Tell me, Pansy, does he love you too?"

Shedding some of her fear, she spoke again. "I'll never be worthy of him. He would never say that, but it's true." Harry noticed that she hadn't directly answered his question.

Malfoy shook his head in wonder. "I swear, he addles everyone he comes in contact with. If he has some special power, it's to make people stupid. Well, you'd better hope he doesn't, because if he does, you'll be dead very shortly, along with him. Of course, you might prefer that than what I've got planned for you."

He Silenced, then Cursed her again, this time for about thirty seconds. Again Harry winced as he saw her endure unimaginable pain. Just that thirty seconds, he knew, was more than he'd suffered in all his dreams combined. When it was over, she lay limp again. Far too weak to stop him, Pansy gasped for breath again as Malfoy got out a small, sharp knife. Harry cringed again, knowing what was coming. Malfoy used the knife to tear her robes and shirt, exposing her stomach. He started below and to the left of her navel, cutting upwards, then down, then up again. She screamed and tried to move, but could hardly manage any movement. As the blood flowed from the cut, Malfoy took the knife's edge and turned up one side of the cut, as if curious to see what was underneath her skin. Harry was revolted that anybody, even Malfoy, could do such a thing.

Malfoy moved from where he'd been as the blood started to reach the floor, and moved to kneel behind her head. "Now, you and he will have even more in common, so you should be happy about that," he said with a cruel smile. "If you're lucky, you'll

die of blood loss before anyone finds you. A small penalty for betraying me like you did. But if you survive, you'll pay a higher price. I'll take my time, I'll wait until you're defenseless and alone, and I'll take the time I don't have now to do this right. You'll be pleading for me to kill you quickly, and maybe I will, if you plead well enough. Or maybe I'll just give you an hour of the Curse, who knows. I wouldn't want to ruin the surprise. But you shouldn't be surprised to see me again, because you will. And I'll be looking forward to it."

He took something out of his robes and adjusted it, and the doorway that Harry had come through suddenly appeared. Without a look back, Malfoy walked through it. Pansy fumbled through her torn robes for her Galleon; finding it, she pressed it. Harry was amazed that she had enough strength to do that much. Suddenly, Pansy was standing up, frozen in place, putting something away in her trunk. The memory was over, and Harry pulled his finger out of the Pensieve.

Pansy looked at him, and he took her hand, looking at her with intense sorrow. "I can barely remember what happened, when it's in there," she said. "I wish I could leave it there. But I know I can't." Harry showed her how to restore her memories, and she did.

She sat up halfway, leaning on one elbow. Harry leaned forward and hugged her, trying to be gentle out of concern for her injury. He desperately wished he could take away her pain. He moved his head and looked into her eyes, wanting her to see how he felt.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said quietly. "I know that was really, really unpleasant. You probably still wonder-"

"I think I know," he said, equally quietly. "You wanted somebody to know what you'd been through. Seeing it is different from hearing about it."

She nodded. "Partly that. I didn't want you to feel bad for me especially, though I knew you would, that it would be really painful for you. That's why I'm sorry. But something in me wants to know, needs to know that you know what I suffered for you. Maybe that's selfish, I don't know. But at the same time, I feel like I didn't suffer it only for you. I feel like I had a debt to pay for all the stuff I'd done before. I think it's safe to say that I've paid it, that I can look in the mirror now. That may sound stupid, but it's what I feel.

"And also... I am scared of him coming back for me. I know he can't get me at Hogwarts, but there's no reason he can't get me during the summer. I'm sure he'll do what he says he'll do."

"I won't let it happen," he said fervently. "I'll do whatever it takes, I'll get the Aurors to protect you or get Dumbledore to keep you at Hogwarts over the

summer if I have to. But I will not let anything happen to you. I'll keep you safe until Malfoy is caught, like you kept me safe." Harry didn't truly know that he could make that happen, but he knew he was determined. He would do something.

"Thank you, Harry," she said. "That was another reason I showed you. I wanted you to know why I was scared. I'm not as brave as you are, you would face that without running for help."

"I'm not so sure of that," he said. "Voldemort's after me, but Dumbledore arranges for my protection. Fortunately, I'm getting stronger, and may not need it that much longer. I'm also going to find out if there's some way I can protect you personally, be your own personal Auror. But you shouldn't be ashamed of being scared. What you went through was horrible, and the thought that worse could happen in the future... I understand why you wanted me to see it. I won't let anything happen to you, Pansy," he repeated, willing it to be true.

"I know. I see it in your eyes, you'll do anything you possibly can. Knowing that makes me feel better. I know how you are when you're that determined, nothing will stop you."

"No, it won't," he agreed, still meeting her eyes. She looked reassured, and happier. After a few seconds, he asked, "How's your stomach doing? Is the cut healing all right?"

By way of answer, she reached down and pulled up her blouse enough to completely expose her stomach. Harry did a double-take as he could see no evidence that there had ever been an injury. He moved his head closer to get a better look, then backed away a bit and glanced up at her, embarrassed that maybe he was looking too closely. She chuckled and said, "Go ahead, look as closely as you want." He did, and could still see nothing. Eyebrows high, he looked at her inquiringly.

"Madam Pomfrey was pretty surprised too," Pansy said, pulling her blouse back down. "She's sure it was because of Fawkes. When she first saw it, she knew it wasn't deep enough to be life-threatening, but she thought there would be a scar. So I'll be sure to thank Fawkes the next time I see him."

"By the way, I wanted to make sure you knew... when I said to Malfoy that I loved you, it was in the same way as you said it to me on that card. I knew that Malfoy would take it the other way, and I was happy to have him do that. I just wanted to make him mad. Guess that wasn't such a good idea."

"He'd have done all that stuff to you anyway, Pansy," Harry said. "And I understood how you meant it, in the memory. But you were wrong about what you said after that; there's nothing that would make you not worthy of me." He saw a skeptical look, then continued. "Please don't tell anyone this, because I haven't told Ginny, and I don't know if I will... but after Hermione and Neville got together, I

started thinking about the idea of a girlfriend more, because I saw how happy they were. It wasn't serious, because I knew I wouldn't let myself have one, at least I thought. I thought, maybe in a couple of years... but I daydreamed about it. When I did, I thought about Ginny, but I also thought about you. It didn't happen to turn out that way, but my point is that it never occurred to me that you weren't worthy of me. I felt like it was very possible."

She smiled and squeezed his hand. "Thank you, Harry. That's one of the nicest things you've ever said to me, and you've said a lot. It means so much to me. I suppose that was just something I told myself so I wouldn't let myself think about it too much. I had to try hard not to fall in love with you. It would have been so easy... anyway, thank you."

Harry nodded, and gripped her hand more tightly. "You spent a lot of time talking to Ron. Did you tell him what happened, what I saw?"

She nodded. "He was so angry at Malfoy, he really wanted to kill him. He said a lot of nice things about me, about what I did all year. He was very sweet. He really can be, when he wants to be. I told him almost everything, but I did leave out one thing. You can probably guess which one."

"I think so," he said. "And I can guess why. If you do end up with him, you don't want that image in his head."

"Yes, that's right. You're the only one who knows, and it's going to stay that way."

Harry shook his head. "I think Hermione knows," he said. To her inquiring look, he added, "I didn't understand it at the time, but... when you signaled yesterday afternoon, we got out the map to find Malfoy, to see if he was anywhere nearby. She was the one looking at the map, and she-

"Saw us in one of the places that couples go for privacy," Pansy finished. "Did she say anything about it?"

"No, she just didn't say anything for a minute, then she said she saw you moving. But then later, in Dumbledore's office, when you said you got Malfoy to tell you what he'd done, she kind of twitched. Now, knowing what happened, I can put it together. She had to have figured it out. I was wondering why she hugged you like that, she must have felt awful for you, and grateful for what you did. But she won't tell anyone, I'm sure of that."

"She's pretty clever, we all know that," Pansy mused. "I think that was why Malfoy was so vicious. I poured on the charm, sympathy, flattery, you name it. I was afraid I might be overdoing it, but he's weak and vain, and it worked. He'd been after me to let him do that for over a year. It was revolting, but I'm proud that I did it."

Harry shook his head in wonder. "There's a big part of me that would rather you hadn't done that, even though I'd be dead if you hadn't," he admitted. "But I know you chose it, and that you're proud of it. It's... just so much..." He trailed off for a minute, then continued, emotion in his voice. "That you would do that for me... it means more to me than I can say."

"I know," she said, her appreciation coming through in her tone. "It's funny, horrible as the Curse was... if I'd known that's what I had to endure to save your life, I would still have done it. I remember when you took on Voldemort in those dreams, I said I couldn't do what you were doing. But I guess I did, in my own way. At that time, I never would have been able to. I suppose it's just a matter of having something you feel really strongly about."

Harry looked back at her, not knowing what to say. He squeezed her hand again. "Thank you," he finally said, knowing it was nowhere near what he wanted to say.

"You deserve it," she said. "It's like what Hermione said at the award presentation, thanking you for being the kind of person you can do that for." After a few seconds, she let go of his hand. "I should let you get on down to breakfast, you don't have tons of time now."

"I'll come back after lunch," he said. "I'm sure we all will."

"Madam Pomfrey will love that," she smiled.

He looked at her again, thinking of what she'd been through. "I love you, Pansy. I love you very much."

"I know," she said. "I love you too, Harry. Now, go to breakfast."

He picked up his bag, looked at her again, and left the infirmary. Reaching the Hall, as he walked to his usual seat, he heard some people start to applaud. By the time he got to his seat, it had reached a crescendo. Hermione looked up at him and said, "Professor Dumbledore just finished talking a few minutes ago. He showed them images of you and your newest shield."

"Did he mention Pansy?" Harry asked. She shook her head.

Harry made a sudden decision; he couldn't bear being applauded while Pansy lay in the infirmary alone. He dropped his bag at his seat, walked up to the teachers' table, and stood before the magical microphone, which was still activated. The applause died down, as people were clearly curious to hear what he had to say.

"Thank you for that," he began. He wasn't sure what he was going to say exactly, but he found he wasn't nervous. After teaching for seven months, he realized, large groups didn't bother him anymore.

"Some of you may know that Pansy Parkinson is in the infirmary now, recovering from an attack she suffered yesterday. What you don't know is that she's been

helping me all year. She's been pretending to be Malfoy's friend, being a spy, essentially, to help keep me safe.

"She saved my life yesterday, and it was the second time. In January, she warned me that Goyle was dangerous, and that warning saved my life. Without her help, then and yesterday, I would be dead." The Hall was totally quiet when he paused.

"She was attacked yesterday evening because Malfoy found out what she'd done. He assaulted her in her dormitory. He put her under the Cruciatus Curse three times, for a total of two minutes. For the Curse, that's an eternity. Believe me, I know. Then he cut her with a knife. Not in passion, but coldly. She could easily have bled to death.

"I'm telling you this because I want you to know who she is, who she really is, what she's done. She came to me in early September and told me she wanted to help me, she wanted to become a different person. In the time since then, I've gotten to know her well, and she's become a very close friend. All this year, she's loathed Malfoy, but pretended to be his friend for my sake, suffered the dislike and mistrust of the entire school, to keep me safe... and has now paid an even worse price for it. I..." His voice started to break; he paused for a few seconds, then continued. "I can never repay her for what she's done. She's not the person you think she is. I ask you, if you support me, please support her. Thank you."

As he walked away from the podium, he heard more applause; he hoped it was for Pansy, not for him. He noticed that all the teachers were in their seats, and were applauding as well. He passed Hagrid-how did I not notice him before? he thought-who smiled and patted him gently on the back as he passed. He sat down with his friends at the Gryffindor table.

Hermione had tears in her eyes. "That was beautiful, Harry," she enthused. Sitting across from him, Ginny reached out for his hand. "It really was," she agreed. Ron, now on Harry's right side, patted him on the shoulder. "Well done, mate," he said. Now I'm sure he's interested in Pansy, thought Harry, amused.

"It was the least I could do," he said. "After what she's been through, she deserves the support of the whole school. I just hope she gets it."

"She will, Harry," said Neville. "People will follow where you lead them."

"He's right, of course," agreed Hermione. "Don't worry, Harry."

"Why did she have you stay back?" asked Ron.

"The Pensieve was still there. She wanted to show me what had happened."

Ron raised his eyebrows. "Why didn't she show all of us?"

"It was really painful to watch, Ron," said Harry, wincing inwardly at the memory. "It was awful. I know you would have anyway, we all would have. She didn't

want to subject you all to it. But she wanted to know that one person knew exactly what had happened to her, and I think it was me because I was the one she was doing it for, who she suffered it for. Believe me, you wouldn't want to see it."

"I believe it," affirmed Ron. "She told me about it in detail, I was just finishing telling them when Dumbledore spoke. It sounded horrible."

"It was," Harry said.

"If I ever manage to get my hands on Malfoy..." Ron said, not needing to finish the sentence. The anger Harry saw in Ron's eyes was further evidence to Harry that Ron had feelings for Pansy.

"I know how you feel," Harry said. "I told her I would find a way to protect her. I'm not sure how I will, but one way or the other, I will."

Ginny squeezed his hand. "I know you will, Harry. We'll all help if we can. I'm especially grateful for her saving your life, you know."

Harry smiled broadly for the first time since seeing Pansy. Feelings about what had happened to her had dominated his thoughts, but now, looking at Ginny brought the feelings he'd had last night flooding back. She smiled at him, love in her eyes. "Harry," she said, "it makes me so happy, that even after all that, just looking at me can make you that happy again."

"I'm sure it always will make me that happy," he said.

"I saw that look, Ron," said Ginny, annoyed. "We may be like this for the rest of our lives-I hope we will-so you'd better get used to it."

Ron chuckled. "Give me a break, it's all a bit much. I am happy for you, you know that. One thing I like about the new seating arrangements is that Ginny and Hermione are both out of hitting range of me. Ow!" he finished, as Hermione leaned around Harry and whacked him on the shoulder. "Okay, out of easy hitting range." The others all laughed.

"Oh yeah, I was so involved, I didn't even notice you'd moved around, until I saw this lovely face across from me." Ginny blushed, and Ron struggled to keep a straight face.

"This is in deference to you and Ginny, of course," Hermione explained. "As I've discovered with Neville, it's better to sit across from your special person, so you can look lovingly at them more easily. I see you two have already picked up on that." She looked over at Ron to get his reaction to this, and seemed disappointed to see him looking undisturbed.

He saw this, and shrugged. "Sorry, Hermione, but I can see I'm massively outnumbered here, so I'm giving up. You four can snog away at the table for all I

care, I'm not going to say a word. It'll be too easy for you to have at me all the time otherwise."

Harry looked up and saw Justin and Ernie approach. "Hi, guys. I'd forgotten, since there were three attempts on my life yesterday, you owe me two more visits."

"I'm sure we'll squeeze them in somehow," said Justin. "Before you got here, Dumbledore showed us your new shield, and told us you Disapparated out of the Chamber when even he couldn't have. I was just wondering if you were going to go shopping for a cape and tights later."

Harry and Hermione chuckled. "Muggle reference," she said to the others.

"No, it's just me, mild-mannered Harry Potter," joked Harry. "It's amazing what you can do when you know you'll die if you don't. I just get a chance to find out a lot more than most people."

Ernie shook his head. "No, Harry. Most people just die, if it happens to them. A lot did, fifteen years ago. Looks like the Killing Curse is one less thing you have to worry about."

"That is a relief, that's for sure," agreed Harry.

"Seems safe to say that there won't be a formal demonstration of this one," commented Ernie.

Harry chuckled. "No, I don't think Dumbledore would allow it. I guess the images are going to have to do. Did the images show it protecting Ginny too?"

"Yes, they did," said Justin. "Oh, and by the way, congratulations, you two. It's all over the tables now about you. I see you overcame your fears, Harry."

"Turns out love was more powerful than I thought," Harry said. "I'm still worried, but with this shield, maybe a bit less worried."

"I would think so," Justin agreed. "And that was a nice speech you gave about Pansy. Ernie and I are going to go up and see her before our first class, and I suspect we won't be the only ones."

"Thank you, both of you," said Harry. "She deserves whatever support she gets."

They nodded and walked off. Harry started in on his breakfast; he knew he would need most of the time left to finish it before his first class. He thought about Pansy, but also enjoyed the comradeship of his friends. He rejoiced in knowing that soon she would too, and not have to hide it.

Harry's morning classes went well, except for the fact that some of his second years were again awestruck. He felt he could deal with it better this time, having experienced it before. He managed to loosen up both classes before they ended.

He and the others ate lunch quickly so they would have more time to go see Pansy. She was sitting up and finishing her lunch when they arrived. "Hi, everyone," she said happily. They pulled up chairs, none of which were far from her bed, and sat.

She looked at Harry affectionately. "I can't believe you did that, but I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. I've had about twenty or twenty-five visitors this morning, some of whom I barely know. A lot of them told me about your speech, and a few got details different from each other, but the idea came across well. They all wanted to wish me well, compliment what I did, give me their support, that sort of thing. It's been really overwhelming; I'm so used to people looking at me as though I were scum that it's hard to adjust. You knew this would happen when you gave that speech. This is what you wanted."

"Pretty much. It's nothing you don't deserve, of course. I just wanted people to know the truth, which is what I told them."

"I do want to take issue with one thing," she said, looking more serious. "You said that you could never repay me for what I did, but you already have. Your love and friendship are the best things I've felt in my life. What you did this morning is just typical of you."

"By the way, Professor Dumbledore came by, a little after classes started. He stayed and talked to me for a while, longer than I expected. Maybe a half hour or so. We talked about the situation with Malfoy, and I told him what happened. He was very reassuring, he said he would make sure I was protected. He said-and I think this was kind of a joke, but it's hard to tell-'I could never look Harry in the eye again if I did not,' meaning, protect me. He said that he was sure that no matter what he arranged, you would want to be a part of it."

"Not only Harry, either," said Ron, and the others nodded.

"Thank you, Ron," she said. "All of you, I appreciate that. I've seen how well you protect Harry."

"I'll bet Madam Pomfrey hasn't been happy with all your visitors," said Harry.

"Professor Dumbledore told her while he was talking to me that I would need emotional support more than quiet bed rest, and suggested-it was an order, but he did it very politely-that I be allowed as many visitors as I got. She didn't look happy, but she didn't argue with him. I was happy, of course. Justin and Ernie were the first ones to come by, they were very nice."

They talked for another fifteen minutes, after which the infirmary door opened, and the five Slytherin first year girls came in. They greeted Pansy and the Gryffindors, but couldn't get too close to Pansy's bed, as there were too many chairs nearby. They stayed back and waited their turn.

"Why not the boys, too?" asked Harry.

"We decided that ten at once was too many, so we flipped a Galleon to see who got to go first," explained Augustina. "We won. They'll be coming later."

To Harry's surprise, Helen walked over to where Ginny was sitting. "Do you know how lucky you are?" asked Helen, as if there was a chance that Ginny might be taking having Harry for granted.

Ginny smiled. "I think that I'm the luckiest girl in the world, not to mention the happiest. If my happiness were energy, it could light up the whole world. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes. And we're happy for both of you. We still wish we were five years older so we could have had a chance, but we're still happy for you."

All of the older students laughed, even Harry. "Thank you," said Ginny fondly. "I can really understand why you would say that. Even for me, I felt like it was too much to hope for. It's a dream come true."

Harry shook his head. "Are you going to keep saying things like that that embarrass me for the rest of your life?"

"If you're lucky, she will," said Hermione pointedly.

"That was Hermione's way," he said to the first years, "of telling me that I should be happy that she feels that way and not be embarrassed."

"We should go, let them have a turn," suggested Hermione. I'm sure that some of us will be in later when we get a chance." They said goodbye to Pansy and started to head out, but Harry stopped.

"I wanted to tell you," he said to the girls, "how proud I am of you-and Pansy, tell the boys I said this too-that you kept this secret all year long, and nobody found out. That's not easy to do, especially for ten people. Thank you for doing that."

"It wasn't that hard," said Augustina. "We like her, so we wanted to help her. We didn't end up being able to do much to help, but we wanted to."

"You did," said Pansy. "You gave me someone to talk to, I knew you cared about me. I really needed that. Now, sit down and tell me about his speech. Others have told me, but I like the story."

Everyone laughed, and Harry and the others left, Harry heading off to the staff room. He walked in and sat on the sofa next to John. John looked at him and said, "So, what's new, Harry?"

Harry pretended to consider the question. "Looks like I didn't need the blindfold or the cigarette after all, and managed to escape the firing squad."

"And get the girl in the process," John agreed. "Not a bad day's work. Oh, I heard Justin from the teacher's table. I was going to make the tights-and-cape joke."

"You're smart, John, you'll come up with others."

"We're all very pleased for you, Harry, that you got past your fears enough to decide to have a relationship," said Flitwick. "But I'd like to ask, did the fact that you can now fight off Avada Kedavra factor into your decision? Like it wasn't quite such a risk anymore, now that you can protect her?"

"No, it didn't enter my mind like that," answered Harry. "Tonks talked to me, helped give me the courage to do it. She convinced me that I'd be hurting Ginny more by not telling her than by putting her in danger. Ginny agreed."

"Hardly a surprise," commented Sprout.

"Professor," said McGonagall in her strict tone, "I suspect you are aware that we teachers know all about the places where student couples go to be alone."

This was greeted by some chuckles; Harry knew she was having fun with him, and he thought of a response. "Professor, I suspect that you yourself were sixteen once."

The teachers broke up laughing. It was the best response any comment of Harry's had ever gotten, probably, Harry thought, because it came at McGonagall's expense. McGonagall was smiling, and trying not to laugh. "I concede the possibility, but it was a very long time ago."

John smiled at Harry. "I've been told that you have an Invisibility Cloak, Harry. I have a feeling you're going to find a few new uses for it."

"Wow, you know, I hadn't thought of that," Harry admitted. "I haven't had time to really think this through."

"You would have figured it out sooner or later," John said. "The teenage mind has great flexibility and creativity when it comes to this sort of thing."

"Hermione's already given us the rundown on the places, and some of you know the Weasleys came by last night. Molly made sure to mention them too. She told us which was her favorite when she was here."

The teacher exchanged impressed looks. "I hope you took that for the compliment it was, Harry," said McGonagall.

Harry nodded. "She was really, really happy. One nice thing about it being Ginny is that I don't have to worry about in-laws, since I already think of them as parents anyway."

"And your aunt and uncle don't care?" Flitwick asked.

"My aunt and uncle would be happiest if they never saw or heard from me again," Harry assured them.

"Why is that, Harry, if I may ask? I mean, you're not such a bad person," said Flitwick, with humorous understatement.

Harry chuckled. "Thank you, Professor. It's not so much me they dislike as magic. They think it's unnatural and strange, and want nothing to do with it. I'm just

a reminder to them of the problem Professor Dumbledore dropped on their doorstep almost sixteen years ago. They've resented it all that time, and they took it out on me. Not being abusive, mind you, just making it clear in every way that I wasn't wanted or welcomed."

Sprout looked at him sympathetically. "There are those who would consider that a form of abuse," she said. "Children need to know they're cared about. To deliberately withhold that... it doesn't say good things about them, to be sure."

Harry couldn't argue with that, so he said nothing. John said, "Oh, Harry, did you know that Hugo is coming? He might already be here, I'm not sure. Any guesses as to why he might be here?"

Harry kept a casual, deadpan expression. "Going to do an article on how incredibly brave Pansy has been all year, I hope."

John nodded. "There might be a separate article about her, actually. It wouldn't surprise me. The new shield will be the main article, of course, that and the three attempts on you in one day. He could easily do separate articles on Pansy and Ginny as well."

Harry cringed. "Oh, please, not one on Ginny, not so soon. Can't they wait until we're married?"

A few teachers chuckled. "Sorry, Harry," said John. "From their point of view, it's irresistible. Just Harry Potter getting a girlfriend is big enough news. But Harry Potter, facing certain death, saves himself and the girl, and then is inspired by her love to unheard-of feats of magical ability, and falls in love... it's way too good a story. May as well have it written by Hugo, and not somebody drawing on second- and third-hand accounts, which is what would otherwise happen."

"Thank goodness for Hugo, anyway," grumbled Harry. "From my other experiences with the press, I probably just wouldn't talk to them, and I'd probably look pretty bad not doing it." He paused. "Funny how I care about that now, I never used to. I guess I'm recognizing part of the grim reality of being Harry Potter, that I'll have a public image whether I like it or not, and it's better that it's a good one."

"Next thing, you'll have to hire yourself a publicist," joked John.

"Don't say that," said Harry fervently. "I get these images in my head, fearing I'll end up like Lockhart, walking up to random people and offering them autographs."

"Don't worry, Harry," said a chuckling Flitwick, "your friends would never let that happen."

"That's true. Thank goodness for them, too."

"Another thing you should be aware of, Harry," said McGonagall, looking serious, "is that he may also do an article questioning Professor Dumbledore's decision to allow Malfoy and Crabbe back into Hogwarts after vacation. This morning,

the headmaster received twenty owls from parents raising such questions, after hearing of the explosion which could have killed a hundred or more students. Unfortunately, it is a legitimate question."

"How can they criticize him for not doing something against the rules?" Harry asked.

"Professor Dumbledore runs Hogwarts the way he, and I, would like to see society run," she explained. "Students have rights, and cannot be searched, disciplined, or expelled for arbitrary reasons, or based on suspicion. But the fact is that these are his rules and principles, not those of wizarding law. He could run this school any way he saw fit, and as long as he had political support, it would not be questioned by the Ministry. He could have expelled Crabbe and Malfoy if he had wished, and as their fathers are known Death Eaters, people would have applauded. That he did not do so is admirable, but also exposes him to criticism when things do not go well. Had the explosion in fact killed a hundred students, he would no doubt have been removed as headmaster by the governors, who would have been under intense pressure to do so. As disaster was narrowly averted, this will not happen, but he will have to answer questions, and his actions will be debated. You will certainly be asked about this, so it is better that you know in advance."

Harry nodded, lost in thought. He supposed he could understand that, though he wished people would trust Dumbledore more. "Thanks for the warning, Professor," he said. He found himself wishing for nothing more than to be with Ginny, to revel in love, and not have to think about things like this. Sometimes, he thought, it would be nice to be an ordinary teenager.

He got that chance, at least for a while, after Transfigurations. There was nothing specific he had to do, nor was there with Ginny, so they decided to try out the spot that Molly had recommended. They checked their maps to make sure no one else was already there, then walked out towards the lake, trying to be as casual as possible. They looked at the lake for a minute, and when it seemed like nobody was looking in their direction, went behind the bushes. Harry felt extremely self-conscious, and told Ginny so.

"Don't worry, I do too, a bit. Hermione said she did the first time as well, and she had to practically drag Neville, he was so nervous. Everybody knows that couples do this, it's no big deal."

"Yeah, but being Harry Potter, I always get noticed. I can't help but wonder if this will too."

"Relax, Harry," said Ginny. "Remember when we kissed in the infirmary last night? What were you thinking then?"

"That I'd like to do it a lot more," he remembered. "And you're going to point out that now I can."

She nodded and looked at him expectantly. He smiled, leaned in, and kissed her. A few seconds at first, the kisses got longer and longer. After a few minutes, they stopped to catch their breath. "Wow, that's so good," he said. "Kind of like being in love, I knew about it, but I had no idea it was as good as it is. It's wonderful."

"I understand that there are even better things to come," she said, grinning.

"Yes, I heard that somewhere, too," he replied, grinning as well. "But I'm happy to do this for now. We can try the other stuff when this gets boring," he joked.

"I hope we don't have to wait that long," she joked back. "I don't see this getting boring anytime soon."

"Hermione really said she had to drag Neville here?" he asked.

"Just the first time," she explained. "After that, he went very willingly."

"I can definitely believe that," he said, and leaned in again. After another few minutes, they came up for air. He felt his head was swimming.

"You know what's best about this," he said, "is that I love you so much."

Stopping to appreciate her expression in response, he then continued, "I mean, I could imagine that this would be nice even if you only sort of liked the person. But there's a part to it that's more than just how it feels physically, if you know what I mean."

"I do know," she agreed. "Do you mind... I want to ask you something, but you don't have to answer if you don't want to... but how was it for you with Cho? I never heard you talk about that."

"It was nothing like this," he said. "I wasn't ready... I knew I liked her, but didn't know what to do. There was only one kiss, and she was crying, so it wasn't such a great experience. But even if she hadn't been, I'm sure it would have been nothing like this. When I kiss you, it feels like it means something."

"I'm so glad, Harry. I think that's what it's supposed to feel like when you're in love. You know..." She looked into his eyes, almost shyly. "I'm kind of embarrassed to admit this, but I will... I used to daydream about this. I'd sit there and imagine that you were in love with me, and kissing me, and stuff. I never thought it could happen, but it was nice to imagine. Part of me still can't believe that it happened, that you're in love with me. I didn't think people's dreams came true like this."

Let's hope it doesn't turn into a nightmare, he thought, then tried to squelch the thought immediately. He looked into her eyes again and sunk back into the feeling of love. "I'm so glad, Ginny. I'm glad I could make you this happy, like you've made me. So, what else happened in these daydreams?"

She raised her eyebrows and smiled, as if wondering whether or not he was teasing her. "I thought you were content to do this for now."

"I didn't mean that to be set in stone or anything. I just thought you might have a better imagination than me."

"I think you'll find that your imagination's just fine," she said, reaching for him. As they kissed again, he remembered Arthur's advice, to revel in this. He decided that he intended to do just that.

They stopped at a little after five o'clock; they had been there for almost an hour, and they both would have been happy to continue, but knew they would have to come back for dinner eventually anyway, and felt it had been long enough. As they walked around the lake on their way back, Harry said, "Did I mention that that was really, really good?" He knew that he had actually said it about five times or so; he just didn't have the words to say it much differently.

"I think you did," she said. Both were smiling; Harry felt as if he smiled quite a lot now, just because of Ginny. "Harry, I love you so much. I can't wait to do this again. But not only this, I just love being with you. Even when we're with the others, even if we can't touch each other, it's still wonderful. When I look into your eyes now... I've always liked your eyes, but now they're especially beautiful, because of what they say about me."

People had often commented on Harry's eyes, but never had the comments made him feel as good as that one, and he told her so. She put her arm around him and leaned into him. "I feel like I'm going to have to figure out a lot of different ways to say I love you, because otherwise, I'll just be repeating myself a lot," she said. He assured her that he didn't mind the repetition.

Harry saw Hugo Brantell about thirty yards away, walking towards them. "The teachers warned me that he'd be here today," he told Ginny. "They said he would write about you, too."

She shrugged. "I suppose that should bother me, but it doesn't right now. I don't think much could bother me right now."

"Well, he's just going to write the truth, which is as much as we can hope for," said Harry. Hugo got closer, and extended his hand. As he shook Harry's hand, then Ginny's, he smiled and said, "Well, the others told me as much, but it's nice to see it for myself."

"What?" Harry asked.

"Let's put it this way, Harry. If there was a beacon shining from your eyes that spelled out the words 'I'm in love,' it wouldn't be that much more obvious than it is now." Turning to Ginny, he said, "Yours too, I should add."

Ginny's smile widened, and Harry couldn't help but smile as well. "Isn't this pretty common when people fall in love?" asked Harry.

"Yes, but yours is especially strong, from both of you. My special powers are telling me that this will be a long and happy relationship."

"I would never argue with your special powers," said Harry. "Especially when they agree with what I feel."

"I want to thank you for not telling him," said Ginny.

"Not telling me what?" asked Harry.

"She means that when I first interviewed her in September, it didn't take long for me to realize that she was in love with you. Of course I never would have told you; people have to find out that kind of thing for themselves. But I don't think I'd be violating any confidences if I told you that your friends are incredibly happy for you; they had hoped this would happen. Especially Ron."

Harry blinked. "Really?"

"I thought that was the case," said Ginny. "I mentioned the idea to him jokingly a few times, and he didn't react negatively like he did anytime I mentioned any other boy I might be interested in. You know, Harry, you're the first close friend he ever had, too. He feels a lot for you, even if he'd never say to you what you said to him in that card."

Harry explained what he'd written in Ron's birthday card, and Hugo laughed heartily. "I can be pretty sure, Harry, that while he may have been embarrassed, he was also very pleased."

"I thought so, I hoped so," said Harry. "I assume you've already talked to most everyone else you're going to? That's what you usually do, I think."

Hugo nodded. "Not everyone, just a few more teachers, and Professor Dumbledore." He stopped, took in Harry's expression, and said, "Yes, I'm sorry, but I have to do the article about him. I'd rather not, I assure you. You know how I admire him, and I respect what he did, even if I wouldn't do it myself. But the questions have to be raised and discussed, and better me than someone else. I'll put it in the proper context, while someone else might just make it seem like he was lazy and didn't care."

Harry sighed. "I can't argue with you, of course. The teachers warned me you'd be writing about that, and I actually said, thank goodness for Hugo, without him I'd probably never talk to the press at all."

Very pleased, Hugo smiled. "Thank you, Harry. I don't think I'd be compromising my journalistic integrity too much by telling you that I'm happy you feel that way. Reporters are supposed to be neutral and objective, but we're human,

too. I think some journalists get so wrapped up in the story that they forget that people are involved."

"Rita Skeeter," Harry muttered.

"Say that name around Hermione, Hugo, and you'll get a lot of information without her even opening her mouth," said Ginny.

"Yeah, she did a job on Hermione, that's for sure," Hugo agreed. "But, you know, I did mention the name to her in September, and Hermione's main reaction was an almost smug satisfaction. She wouldn't say anything about it; my best guess is that she found out something about Rita that helped put her out of action for awhile."

"Hermione's pretty clever," said Ginny humorously.

"I'd tell you, but I think I'd be violating Hermione's confidence if I did," said Harry. "I doubt it's that important for you to know, anyway."

"True," agreed Hugo. "Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom okay?" They set out for the castle.

"Say, Hugo," asked Harry, "did you just happen to come out here at a good time, or-"

"I was with Ron," Hugo answered. "He was keeping an eye on the map, and he let me know when you moved. Don't worry, that won't make it into the article."

"If it did, Mum would be pleased to know we used her spot," joked Ginny.

"I see that she was happy about this," commented Hugo. "I'll be talking to your parents later on."

"I hope your deadline isn't tomorrow," said Ginny. "You'll never get Mum to shut up. She was walking on air when we told her."

"It's always nice to talk to happy people," said Hugo.

"Hugo, I just wondered... personally, how has the Apparation Restriction Act affected you?" asked Harry.

"You're trying to get a sense of public opinion by asking me, I see. The problem is, Harry, I understand the issues better than most people. Even if it inconvenienced me a lot, I wouldn't be bothered. But no, it's not a huge problem. I can take fireplaces to most places, and I'll take a broom if I need to. It doesn't affect me much. Most people feel like I do, in fact. But I will tell you that there's already starting to be rumblings in the Ministry about Ministry higher-ups and their benefactors trying to figure out how they can get special permission to Apparate for non-emergency reasons. You hadn't considered this possibility when you supported it; that's the problem with being sixteen years old and noble, Harry, you don't imagine how selfish people can be. Don't worry, if I get any solid information on this, I'll

write about it. I may know enough about people to be a bit cynical, but I'm also disgusted by it."

"Just incredible..." Harry couldn't think of much more to say. They walked up the steps to the castle, and headed for the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. In the hour before dinner, Hugo didn't get a chance to ask all the questions he wanted, so he came to dinner with Harry and the rest. He finished his questions, thanked them, and headed off to talk to more teachers.

Harry knew he had to get some homework done that evening-he hadn't had much time for it the previous evening-but he wanted to talk to Professor Dumbledore first. He hadn't talked to him privately at any length about what had happened, and he wanted to know what Dumbledore thought. He headed toward Dumbledore's office, but received no answer when he knocked. He realized that Dumbledore might be in his quarters, so he decided to go there. He knocked, and the door opened. "Harry," said a pleased Dumbledore, getting up. "I was just finishing my dinner. Please come in, have a seat."

Harry sat in the chair he'd sat in when he had the dinner with Dumbledore before the term started. "Have you had a good day, Harry?" asked Dumbledore. This was not a usual question from him, so Harry assumed he was referring to how he felt about Ginny.

"Very good, sir," Harry answered. "It feels wonderful. I don't have to have experienced everything to know that there's nothing better than this. I still fear that something could happen-maybe even more than before, since now I know exactly what I could lose-but I don't regret that I did it. Now I just wish I had done it before."

"Things must happen in their own time, Harry," Dumbledore advised. "There are times we are not ready for things, and they must wait until we are. So, what would you like to discuss?"

"A few things, sir. First, I wanted to know what you thought about how what happened yesterday will affect any future encounters I have with Death Eaters, or Voldemort. Ron was saying he thought I might be able to take on Voldemort now, since I can defend against the Killing Curse. I didn't think so; I assume he's got lots of stuff that I don't know, and would find it hard to defend against. Is that right?"

"Unfortunately yes, Harry. I believe now that power for power, you could stand up to him. But, as you suggest, he is expert in all sorts of Dark magic, the defenses for which you do not yet know, and would take you a few years to learn. With enough time, you could defeat him in a head-to-head battle. But I fear that you will be called upon to face him sooner than that. Based on your performance in crisis situations before, I am not pessimistic about how you would handle yourself. You will be able to

stay calm and focused, I am sure. But I would say it is not something you should seek, not yet.

"As for the Death Eaters, yes, I believe that you could defeat most of them. Being able to block the Killing Curse gives you a tremendous advantage when you duel. Your shield will come on without your conscious thought should a deadly curse break through your defenses. Kingsley tells me that your dueling skills are coming along very well, and I believe that your falling in love will affect your other magical skills as it did your ability to Disapparate. As you refine your dueling skills further, even if your technical skills do not match theirs, your power may be greater, making you their equal. I shall greatly look forward to Kingsley's next report."

"Was that what you were talking to Cassandra and Tonks about last night?"

"Yes, among other things. They were awed that you could escape the Chamber, even more so than by your newest shield. They recognize that it suggests a large increase in your power, and wished to discuss its implications. For example, they suspect that next Saturday when you practice your anti-Disapparation field, none of them will be able to escape, and if that is the case, you could even do one that would trap Voldemort. And that would have substantial implications regarding the notions of a raid against Voldemort, should we get solid intelligence of his whereabouts."

"Do you mean intelligence that wouldn't compromise Professor Snape?"

"Yes, I should have clarified that. We cannot risk him until we know Voldemort can be defeated. Your power notwithstanding, I still do not know precisely how that will be accomplished. There is one thing I am certain of, Harry: if you defeat Voldemort, it will not be by using a Killing Curse. As your magic is based on the energy of love, I believe you would simply not be capable of it."

"I've wondered about that too, sir," Harry admitted. "How am I going to beat him, then? What can I do that would kill him?"

"You should recall, Harry, the exact wording of the prophecy. It did not use the word 'kill,' but the word 'vanquish.' I would speculate that you will find a way to 'vanquish' him without killing him, as such. Granted, the prophecy also says that one of you will die at the hands of the other, but the phrase is still not as direct as 'kill,' and prophecies can be fulfilled in unexpected ways which do not contradict the prophecy. I admit I cannot imagine how that would be done. But I believe the prophecy is accurate, and that a way will present itself when the time is right."

"Hmmm... I guess I shouldn't worry about that right now, then. Anyway, I also wanted to ask you what you have in mind for Pansy's protection. She said you said you'd take care of it, and I know you will, but I feel personally responsible for it too. I'd like to have something to do with it."

"I imagined you would, Harry. I have not yet decided on a final plan, but there are a number of things that could be done. I am sure that the Aurors would look favorably on a request to provide her special protection, for example. As for a location, I have yet to talk to Arthur and Molly, but I am thinking of the Burrow as a place she could stay for the summer. With a little effort, it could be made highly secure, and you could help in that effort."

"That sounds great, sir. How could I help?"

"You could help in laying down an anti-Disapparation foundation on the grounds, much like the one here at Hogwarts, but reversible. If your ability to Disapparate out of the Chamber is any indication, the area you create would definitely disallow any Apparation by Death Eaters, and perhaps even Voldemort. Not that he would go on such a mission alone, of course. But you could be instrumental in ensuring the Burrow's security.

"In addition to that, Pansy can be outfitted with jewelry similar to what your cousin has. She can wear what would essentially be a Malfoy detector. Professor Snape has acquired a few strands of his hair from his bed; they can be used to imbue a jewel to serve as an alarm if he gets within a certain distance. You, and I suspect, your friends, can be equipped with jewelry that will signal you when that alarm sounds; you should be able to Apparate to her location within seconds in the unlikely event it should become necessary. If she resides at the Burrow and you all wear such devices-hers going off would alert Aurors as well, of course-she will be very secure."

"So," Harry said, "if that ends up being what we do, then it would make sense for me to spend the summer there, too, I assume. I mean, it would be almost as secure as Privet Drive is for me, and I was going to have to leave there soon anyway." Harry hoped that Dumbledore wouldn't contradict him. He knew he would do what Dumbledore suggested, but he wanted to be at the Burrow even more than he didn't want to be at Privet Drive.

Dumbledore gave him a small smile, obviously having a clear understanding of Harry's emotional state. "Yes, your new strength combined with the security in place will surely discourage any attempts on you while there. You need not go back to Privet Drive. It is a burden you have borne for too long as it is."

Harry exhaled visibly, without having intended to. Thank goodness, he thought, never to have to go back there again. "It's not only that, sir, it's getting to spend the whole summer with Ginny... it'll be the first time I ever looked forward to summer."

Dumbledore nodded. "It will not be a relaxed summer, however. I have no doubt the Aurors will want you for training at least a few days a week."

"That's fine, sir, as much as they want," he said. "Ginny knows that the stronger I get, the better I can protect both of us."

"That is good, Harry. There is one other thing I wished to mention as far as Pansy's protection goes. Measures will be taken which assume that Malfoy will energetically attempt to fulfill his threats. The fact is, however, that he will almost certainly not do so. Not because of a lack of desire to," he quickly added, forestalling Harry's objection, "but because he will not be authorized to. It will not surprise you to learn that he will be fully indoctrinated as a Death Eater very shortly. Once he is, the chances of his pursuing any sort of personal vengeance are reduced to near zero. For Death Eaters, obedience to Voldemort is primary, and he does not allow them to engage in any operations without his instructions. Even if Malfoy were to ask for permission, which is highly unlikely, Voldemort would almost certainly refuse, because Pansy is of no strategic importance. So while Malfoy undoubtedly meant what he said to Pansy when he said it, he did not realize that he would not be allowed to follow through."

"I'm very glad to hear that, sir. I would still think the protection was essential, of course, since we can't know for a fact that it won't happen. But that is good. Did you tell Pansy that when you talked to her this morning?"

"No, Harry, I did not. After suffering what she did, she did not need to be told that he would not follow through on his threat. She needed to be told that she would be safe even if he did. I would have eventually, just not right then. You may tell her if you wish."

"Thank you, sir, I will. I'll emphasize that there will still be strong protection, of course." They talked for a little longer, and Harry was going to get up to leave, but stopped. "One other thing, sir. Nothing important, but over the past few weeks, I've had a few dreams about the Veil of Mystery. Not Voldemort dreams, of course, I would have let you know, but they didn't seem like regular dreams either. Not much happens in the dreams; it's just that archway, sitting there. Not even calling to me, which it seems like it should. But it reminded me, has anything happened with that thing from my dream before the term started, that Legion of Doom thing?"

"'Legion of the Dead,' Harry," Dumbledore corrected him. "Nothing specific, no. And as for the dreams, it is not surprising that it should appear, as it is a compelling structure. We sometimes go through periods in which our dreams focus on one thing or another. It is understandable that you would take it seriously, given your other experiences with dreams. But unless something more happens in these dreams, I would not worry about it."

Harry thanked Dumbledore and left, heading back to the Gryffindor common room. On the way, he had an idea for a test to see if his magic's power had really changed. Entering the common room, he found Hermione, Neville, and Ginny studying together. "Where's Ron?" he asked. Hermione smiled and raised her eyebrows a bit.

"Oh, with Pansy," he said. Now the others smiled too; Harry could see that she was right in saying that the others would try to push them together, or at least want to. Harry did not plan to do that at all, fearing it could be counterproductive. He exchanged a loving look and smile with Ginny, then said, "Neville, could we have a few duels?"

"Sure," said Neville, getting up.

As they took their positions, Hermione joked to Ginny, "Oh, how I hate it when our men fight like this." Ginny chuckled.

What Harry had thought might happen did happen; he demolished Neville, taking all five bouts in times ranging from ten to thirty seconds. Harry and an amazed Neville sat back down with the girls. "When we started training with the Aurors, Harry and I were evenly matched," said Neville to Ginny and Hermione. "Over the past few months, Harry had started to get better than me, I'd only win a quarter or a third of our bouts. But now, all of a sudden I can't touch him, I was lucky to last thirty seconds once. It's not that his tactics are any better, but he's just overpowering. Even if I don't make any mistakes, I still lose. I have to think it's because he's in love."

Harry nodded. "I told you last night what Dumbledore thought about my Disapparating out of the Chamber, and I wanted to find out if it applied to the rest of my magic. It seems that it does."

Neville shook his head in amazement. "I've lasted up to nearly a minute in my best bout against an Auror, and I could barely do thirty seconds against Harry. He's going to be a match for them in dueling, he'll definitely beat at least some. It's pretty incredible."

"It's funny, I don't even really care that much," he said. "I mean, it's nice, and I'm sure it'll be helpful, but for now, I have more important things on my mind." He looked at Ginny during the last part of the sentence. He got out his books and joined them in doing homework. Sitting next to Ginny, even that felt much better than usual.

Harry and the others headed down to breakfast the next morning at their usual time. They were still in the mode of protecting him, though they knew that any attempt on him was now highly unlikely, and they were at nowhere near as high a state of readiness as they had been on Monday.

They took their now-usual seats, and as they did, the morning owls came in with the mail. Copies of the Prophet dropped in front of Harry, Hermione, and Ginny, who picked hers up slowly. "I guess this is because there's an article about me," she said.

"I'm sorry," said Harry sincerely. "I'm afraid it comes with the territory."

"It's worth it, it's really good territory," she said, opening the paper. Harry and Hermione did as well, Harry sharing his with Ron, as Ginny did with Neville. They slowly ate as they read. "Wow, four Hogwarts-related articles," said Neville. "The main one, about the attempts on Harry and the new spell, then one on Pansy, a smaller one on Ginny, and one on Professor Dumbledore not expelling Malfoy and Crabbe."

"How in the world did he write four articles in one night?" wondered Harry aloud. "I know he said he wrote fast, but still..."

Hermione read aloud from the Dumbledore article. "'While admitting that he would have expelled Malfoy and Crabbe had he been in the same position, Professor Potter nonetheless offered a spirited defense of his headmaster's actions...'

There's a long quote from you, I see you told the Hagrid story, that's good, it illustrates your point pretty well... wow, Pansy defends him too, I didn't know that.

'Asked how she felt about Professor Dumbledore's actions, Miss Parkinson said, "He's the headmaster, he has to do what he thinks is best. I don't have the knowledge or experience to criticize him. And I refuse to blame anyone for what happened to me other than Malfoy. Also, I knew what I was doing when I got into this. I knew there was a risk, and I took it."' That's very good of her, considering what happened."

"Yes, I'd say so," Harry agreed. He thought he heard Ron make a noise that sounded like a grunt. "What?" he asked Ron.

"Nothing," responded Ron, with just enough discomfort to suggest to Harry that Ron wasn't being truthful.

Normally Harry wouldn't pursue the question, as he preferred not to try to make Ron talk when he didn't want to. But on this occasion, Harry felt compelled to know what Ron meant. Instead of pressing Ron, he decided to try to guess what Ron was referring to. "Do you think she's being too nice to Dumbledore?"

The 'can we not talk about this?' look on Ron's face told Harry he was right; Harry raised his eyebrows in response. Clearly deciding he'd been found out, Ron sighed, then spoke. "I didn't want to say anything, because I know how you feel about Dumbledore. And I understand the principle, and I know it makes sense. At least in theory. But... you saw it, you know how bad it was. That's going to be with her for a long time. And the worst thing is, I think in a way she feels like she deserved it. Not for what she did to Malfoy, of course, but for all the stuff she did before."

It looked to Harry as though Ron was angry, but trying to control his feelings.

"That's ridiculous, of course, and I told her that last night, when we talked about it," Ron continued. "I mean, okay, she was mean and nasty. She enjoyed hurting people that she and Malfoy didn't like. But that's just a... a huge difference from the Cruciatus Curse, never mind for that long a time. You just can't compare them, it's

like saying someone deserves to be killed for stealing a few Galleons. But I think she won't blame anyone else because she's too busy feeling like she deserved it, but that's just wrong. She didn't deserve it, and she doesn't deserve to feel like she does."

There was silence for a moment; no one was reading the newspaper. "I don't think anyone here will argue with you about that, Ron," said Hermione, her expression somber. "I would say the same thing to her that you said. But we really can't know what it feels like for her."

Neville spoke. "Is it like, you don't want her to blame herself, so you blame Dumbledore?"

Ron grimaced slightly and hesitated, suggesting that while he didn't want to say it that way exactly, Neville wasn't too far off. "I blame Malfoy first, obviously," Ron clarified, with a glance at Harry. "But none of us would have done what Dumbledore did; he could have prevented this. Not only this, but you and Ginny almost died, would have if not for this energy-of-love thing you have going. If you had died, I don't think I'd be sitting here saying, 'well, at least Dumbledore did what he thought was right, gotta give him credit for that.' I'd be wishing someone else had been headmaster. Yes, I know the Hagrid story, I was there when they took him away. But I'd bet if you asked Hagrid about the trade-off-he has to spend a week in Azkaban, and in return, Crabbe and Malfoy aren't allowed back in-he'd take that trade. I know Dumbledore's reasons, Harry. But it's too extreme. I can't sacrifice people on principle, and I can't approve of it. If you could've stopped something, and you don't, you do have responsibility."

There was another silence, as Harry struggled with what Ron had said. He still wasn't inclined to blame Dumbledore, since he knew better than anyone how heavily the consequences of his actions weighed on Dumbledore, but he didn't feel he could argue with Ron, either. "He would be the first to agree, with that last sentence," said Harry. "I'm sure he feels responsible for what happened to Pansy, what almost happened to us. I just..." He trailed off, feeling uncomfortable saying anything that opposed Ron or Dumbledore.

Ron seemed to understand. "Don't worry about it. I wasn't going to say anything, this is only because you asked me."

Harry nodded in acknowledgment, and told himself that from then on, if Ron didn't want to talk about something, he wouldn't encourage him to. They all went back to reading their newspapers. Harry started on the article about Ginny, which was shorter than the rest. After a few minutes of reading, he looked to his left.

"Hermione, what does 'vivacious' mean?"

"'Spirited' or 'lively,'" she answered, distracted, as she read.

"Well, that sounds right," said Harry. "He could just say that, though."

"I would explain to you why that word is better than the others, Harry, but I'm reading right now. Ask me later, I'll tell you." Harry looked at Ron, and they both smiled, knowing that Harry would not ask. Not having moved her head from the paper, Hermione continued, "Don't think I don't know what you two just did. You're so predictable..." Now Harry and Ron exchanged a less pleased look as Ginny and Neville chuckled.

Reading the article about Ginny, Harry said, "It's not as bad as I expected. Lots of nice things about Ginny, which is good." To her, he continued, "Mentions the Chamber from four years ago, I should have expected that. Molly is described as 'deliriously happy,' guess we knew that. Flattering quotes from classmates..." Harry's mouth dropped open in surprise, and he looked at Ron, who already looked embarrassed. "Thank you, Ron. I'm very touched." Ron nodded, but didn't say anything.

"What did he say, Harry?" asked Neville. "Ginny's on a different page."

"Of course, I'm really happy. They're both great people, and they'll be really good for each other. I couldn't have wanted any better for either of them." He looked at Ron again, with gratitude; Ginny did as well. "Oh, that's so sweet, Ron," said Hermione, reaching around Harry to squeeze Ron's shoulder; Harry moved forward so she could reach more easily.

"I didn't really say that, Hugo just looked at my face and figured it out," joked Ron.

"Even if that were true, I'd still think it was really nice," replied Ginny. "Thank you."

They read and ate in silence for a few minutes. Hermione said, "Okay, I've finished all four articles, and-"

"That was fast, I'm still on the second," commented Ron.

"I read fast, Ron, how do you think I do all that reading for classes? Anyway, there's a very interesting omission: nowhere in these articles does it mention what we all assume to be the reason for the increase in Harry's power, nor does it ever say specifically that there was a sudden increase. From reading this, you'd assume that Harry always had the ability to Disapparate out of Hogwarts."

"Why did he do that?" asked Neville.

"Thank you, Hugo..." Harry said to himself, realization dawning. To Ginny and Neville, he said, "Dumbledore must have persuaded him to do this; he must want to keep it a secret that this is why I got stronger."

"But wouldn't he want everyone to know what love can do?" wondered Neville.

"Yes, he would, Neville, but not until Voldemort and his people are dealt with," explained Hermione. "Dumbledore's being cautious. He's concerned that if Death Eaters know that Ginny is responsible..." She trailed off, looking at Ginny sadly.

"...they'll think about getting rid of Harry's power source," finished Ginny, looking both frightened and determined. "I don't care, Harry," she said. "I knew what I was getting into, never more than when I thought we were going to die in the Chamber. Besides, I know you. You won't let anything happen to me."

"No, I won't," he said quietly. "Besides, it's not going to happen like that anyway, since Dumbledore did make sure that didn't make its way into print. Funny thing is, it probably wouldn't have mattered anyway-Voldemort wouldn't take it seriously, he'd assume it was just some stupid invention of the press. Since he has contempt for love, he'd never believe it could be a source of power. But it was still very smart of Dumbledore to do that. I hadn't thought of it."

He was going to say something else, but stopped when he heard applause start, and slowly swell. He looked around, and saw Pansy near the entrance to the Hall. He immediately jumped up off his seat and ran toward her, the others close behind him. She took a few steps towards him, smiling. He reached her and hugged her tightly. Then he stepped aside for Hermione, who hugged Pansy next, after which the other three did too, to sustained applause. They walked back to their seats, taking Pansy along with them, as the applause died down. They had Pansy sit down opposite Ron; Harry could see that she had tears in her eyes.

"I've never been applauded before," she said, accepting a tissue from Hermione. "You know, Harry, when you were having the Voldemort dreams, you said a few times how much it helped you that the school supported you. I think I know what you mean now. All those visitors yesterday, and now that... it feels so good to know that people appreciate what I did. And thank you again for telling them."

He shook his head. "It was so little compared to what you did. I'm just happy that now we get to be your friends is public, no more hiding and looking at maps."

"Yes, now you'll be looking at maps for different reasons," she teased him. The others chuckled.

Pretending to be annoyed, he said, "All right, who told her?"

She rolled her eyes fleetingly. "Nobody had to tell me, Harry, come on. Of course you're going to go to the places for couples, and of course you'd use the map. Hermione told me how she used it for that."

"Really," said Neville, as though what she had said was only mildly interesting. "What else did she tell you?"

Pansy smiled. "Wow, Neville, I'm impressed that you're not embarrassed for me to say that kind of thing at the table. Let's see, she said-"

"That's okay, forget I mentioned it," said Neville quickly, to general laughter. Hermione laughed especially hard, then said, "Pansy, it's very good to have you at the table." She looked up, and got up from her seat and walked to the teachers' table.

"What'd she do that for?" asked Neville.

"I think McGonagall motioned her over there," said Ron. "That's pretty unusual."

"I think I know why," said Pansy glumly. "It's against the rules to sit at any table except your house's."

"You really don't think she's going to be like that, do you?" Ron asked.

"It would seem a bit strict, but you know McGonagall," said Ginny.

Hermione sat back down, looking happy. "She said she wanted to tell me about a new rule. Apparently, prefects are allowed to sit wherever they want."

Pansy looked over at McGonagall, who was talking to the teacher next to her. "She's not looking at you on purpose," Harry advised her. "She doesn't want to acknowledge doing something nice. I'll tell her in the staff room later that you appreciated it."

Hermione handed her copy of the Prophet to Ginny, who gave it to Pansy. "Here, read that while you eat," said Hermione. "There's a good article in there." The paper she had handed over was opened to the article on Pansy.

Three days later, Harry had his first Auror training session since Monday's events, but it was as much testing as training; the Aurors were trying to determine the extent of Harry's current magical power. Dueling yielded much the results that Neville had predicted; Harry beat some Aurors more than they beat him, and some could beat him more than he could beat them. Even those said they felt that their superior skill and experience was all that allowed them to beat him, and were sure that once his skills matched theirs, they would rarely or never defeat him.

Apparation testing yielded similarly impressive results. Kingsley and Dawlish were considered to be the two strongest Aurors, but even they could not escape his anti-Disapparation field. Dumbledore was summoned, and to the astonishment of the Aurors, and Harry himself, Dumbledore could not escape the field either. Then he put a field onto Harry, who escaped it. Harry then had several practice duels with Dumbledore, who defeated him soundly and repeatedly. Dumbledore expressed to him and the Aurors what Harry had assumed: that he was strongest when it was a question of sheer power, but in matters where skill and experience were important, he was still some time away from reaching his ultimate potential. Still, everyone was amazed at the change.

Harry spent some time talking about his newest spell, what little he felt he could tell them. Dumbledore, for the Aurors' benefit, asked Harry some questions about his focus on love and how he went about channeling that into his magic. Harry felt that he was not quite sure himself, but he talked as much as he could about what he was thinking and feeling at the time he believed he started doing it. Dumbledore then gave the Aurors some advice about how to reach the state of mind that he and Harry did, with the idea that eventually they could do the same thing, and so use Harry's new spells. Dumbledore's talk to the Aurors gave Harry an idea.

At dinner at Hogwarts later that evening, Harry told his friends that he wanted to talk to them in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom after dinner. They headed off there together after they were finished eating. To the others' amusement, Harry showed off a bit by simultaneously moving fourteen desks off to the sides of the room, then moving the remaining desks into a circle, all six at once. They sat down. He had already told them at dinner about the results of the informal testing; now, he told them what had happened later, the talk that Dumbledore had given the Aurors.

"So, this is what I want to talk to you about, see what you think. From what happened to me last week, it's easy to see that there's huge potential for wizards to become stronger by using the energy of love in their spells. Now, the big question is, is this something that anybody could do with the right kind of training and practice, or is it something that only a very few wizards, like Dumbledore or me, could do? I have no idea, but I'd really like to find out.

"When Professor Dumbledore was talking to the Aurors, it occurred to me that I have a unique opportunity. I'm the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. If I thought this could work, I could teach it in my classes-

Hermione couldn't restrain herself from interrupting. "Oh, that would be wonderful! I hadn't thought of that. You could teach a whole generation to use the energy of love! It could be a revolution in how wizards use magic!"

Harry couldn't help but smile at her enthusiasm. "Well, that would be the ideal, but I definitely don't know if it could happen. The thing is, like I said, I don't know if it's the case that it can be taught like that, and I don't want to spend a lot of class time on something that I don't even know will work or not. So, before I even try that, I want to find out. That's why I wanted to talk to you."

As usual, Hermione was the first to figure it out. "You want to see if you can teach us..."

He nodded. "I have to try to teach someone before I'll try it in my classes. You're the ideal people to try to teach, for more than one reason. The six of us are very close, and that's very helpful to start with. We can have a very comfortable

atmosphere from the beginning. Now, the thing about this that's hard, but would be less hard for us, I think, is being comfortable being really open and talking about this sort of thing. I'm sure you remember that it was hard for me at first, but I had the motivation of desperately needing to deal with Voldemort to push me along. You don't have that, and I don't want to feel like I'm pushing anyone to do anything they're not comfortable with, or wouldn't want to invest the time and effort in something that might not work. So-

"Harry," said Ron, "sorry to interrupt, but I think we all know you're talking mostly about me here. I know, I know, not only me, you mentioned the effort and everything, and that could apply to anyone. But I'm the only one who the bit about being comfortable applies to."

"Not necessarily, Ron," Pansy put in. "I've never really been that kind of person myself. I've gotten that way somewhat this year, because Harry, and then the rest of you, have been so good to me. But it still doesn't come naturally to me. I think that Hermione, Ginny, and Neville are more like that naturally."

Ron nodded his understanding. "Okay, but I still think Harry knew he was pretty much talking about me. And I can't pretend it's going to be totally easy for me. But I really want to do this, and I'll do my best to put aside my... being reserved. Partly because it could make me stronger, but more to help Harry, and because I don't want the other five of you doing something like this without me. I..." Ron took a breath, then continued. "I feel very close to all of you, and if you do this, I want to do it with you."

"Thank you, Ron," said Hermione.

"We appreciate it," agreed Harry, understanding that saying something that was difficult for him to say was Ron's way of saying he was serious about it. "But just to be sure before I continue... all the rest of you do want to do this?"

The other four nodded. "Of course," said Pansy.

"I'm glad, thank you," said Harry. "I'm not saying that we're constantly going to be saying how much we love each other, or something like that. Honestly, I don't know what'll be involved. I'm just going to feel my way through it, and maybe you can help me. It was just that in my case, I found it was necessary to say things like that, that were hard to say, or even think things. For example, back in August and September, Professor Dumbledore advised me to think of love as feelings of closeness and friendship, and focus on those feelings. So I had to think about who those feelings were associated with, and the answer was obviously Ron, Ginny, and Hermione. With Ginny and Hermione, it was easy, because they're girls. But I kind of had trouble at first including Ron with that, because he's male, and it's awkward to think like that. And then later on, it was awkward to say it in front of him, but I felt

like I had to, that I had to do it full out or it wouldn't work, so I did. I'm just saying, I don't know how this will work, but there could be that kind of situation."

"It's hard to argue with the results you've had, Harry," said Neville. "Now, we know that it's possible that this could be useful for increasing magical power only with you. But I would do this anyway. You had to do this to survive, and it's changed you. Even before you and Ginny, we saw that it made you a happier person, more relaxed. That's a good goal in itself." The others nodded in agreement.

"Right, okay," said Harry. "Well, first I'll talk in as much detail as I can about what was happening in my mind when I started doing this, and how things changed as I made progress. And sometimes we should stop and pause, and try to get that feeling going in our minds, and talk about how we feel or if we're having problems. And we'll see how it goes from there. Of course, anybody should interrupt if they have a question or a comment. Here goes..."

Harry started talking, and found it got easier as he went along. In what seemed like very little time, two hours had passed, and they had to go back to their common rooms. Harry didn't have any idea whether it would work or not, but it felt like a good start, and that he and the others would be happy to do it. For the time being, that was enough.

Chapter 21

Reborn From the Ashes

As April turned into May, Harry was as busy as he had ever been at Hogwarts, but happier as well. He tried very hard to make sure he got at least an hour a day with Ginny, and tried to base the rest of his activities around that. There was more Quidditch practice as well, as the last match was coming up soon. He also tried to make sure that there were at least two sessions a week of his attempt to teach the others how to use the energy of love in their magic. So far, there were no concrete results, other than a greater sense of contentment after the sessions.

Harry was also happy because he no longer had to hide his friendship with Pansy. Now he felt it unfortunate that he had no classes with Slytherins, but he had a chance to talk to her at meals; she had developed a habit of eating her food with other Slytherins, then joining Harry and his friends after she was finished eating. There was a Hogsmeade day in late April that passed uneventfully, and the five Gryffindors were pleased to be able to spend it with her openly.

At Dumbledore's suggestion, Harry started to have occasional dueling sessions with a surprising sparring partner: Professor Snape. It was Dumbledore's feeling

that it would be helpful for Harry to practice against someone who could represent how a Death Eater would fight against him. To illustrate the point, Dumbledore first asked Snape to have five bouts with Harry using no particular Dark magic, only the sort of things Harry was learning from the Aurors. Under those conditions, Harry won four out of five hard-fought bouts. In another five bouts, with Snape using Dark magic, Snape won all five. Harry definitely wanted to learn how to deal with Dark magic while dueling, so he was happy to have the sessions, even if they were less pleasant than his Auror sessions.

There were no Death Eater attacks for three weeks after the Apparation Restriction Act went into effect, after which there was an attack on Muggles by Death Eaters who had apparently used brooms to reach the scene. Even so, it represented a decrease in the frequency of attacks, which Harry was quite happy about.

In early May, Harry decided to spend a little gold, and bought two somewhat expensive books. One was a compendium of advanced Dark magic that Harry wanted as a reference book. He knew the school library had it, but he wanted his own copy. He looked through it sometimes, wondering which sorts of things he would be most likely to run into from Voldemort. It had a section on dueling that Harry found particularly interesting. The other book was the definitive book on phoenixes, titled 'Reborn From the Ashes,' the book from which Hagrid had taken the quote. He had tried to check it out from the library, but it always seemed to be checked out already. After trying three times, he decided to just get his own copy. Since he was a phoenix companion, he reasoned, he should have his own copy anyway. The phoenix book cost ten Galleons, and the Dark magic one, thirty-five. He wondered if they were so expensive because there were so few wizards to sell books to that they had to charge more to make it worth writing a book. The phoenix book was much more pleasant reading, but he tried to read them equally often, as the other one could be highly useful.

The third Saturday of May was a typical Saturday for Harry. He and Neville had eight hours of Auror training, though sometimes not together; Harry's power was so far beyond Neville's that sometimes it was deemed appropriate to separate them so that each could work at his own ability level. Sometimes Harry was taught spells which could not be learned unless the wizard was sufficiently powerful; for example, he was taught how to cast the wide-field calming spell that he had seen the Aurors use after the department store attack. It was a spell commonly used by Aurors, but very difficult to cast, as was any spell which had an area effect. They also started working with him on spells that blocked hostile area-effect spells.

At lunch the conversation turned to politics, as Harry was finding it did more and more recently; he wondered if that was just natural for Aurors, or if they considered it another part of his education. It wasn't his favorite topic, but he knew that he would have to learn it, so he reluctantly paid attention and applied himself. He knew that it had consequences; for example, politics were what had foisted Dolores Umbridge onto Hogwarts last year, and they had all suffered greatly as a result of that. He didn't doubt Dumbledore's political astuteness, but if even Dumbledore could be outmaneuvered, Harry knew he had a lot to learn.

"How's it going with the ARA violators?" Harry asked halfway through lunch. "It's been a month and a half since it started, so I'd assume people know by now?"

"Mostly," agreed Teddy Wirshire. "We still get one or two a week who don't know, but it's been so long now, we can't just let them off with warnings. We have to take them in for processing."

"That reminds me, I never thought to ask, what's the penalty for violating the act?"

"That subject was debated a bit, I'm surprised you didn't read about it in the Prophet," commented Cassandra.

"I don't really read the Prophet," replied Harry. "I'd much rather talk to Ginny and the others over breakfast than read the paper, and I'm not that interested in it anyway."

"That's understandable, Harry, but you really should read it," suggested Kingsley. "Even if you weren't Harry Potter, it's better to read it, because the more informed we all are, the stronger a society we are. We can't be a part of the political debate if we aren't informed. Also, remember during the debate on the ARA, you were worried that it would start to lead to other, worse things. Well, if those kind of things start to bubble up, the Prophet is where you'll read about it. If you don't, they could happen before you know it, before they can be stopped."

"Well, Kingsley, he's only sixteen-" started Tonks.

"I know, I was just speaking generally," replied Kingsley. "But what I said is the case especially for you, being Harry Potter. Not knowing what's going on could make you weaker politically, or easier to manipulate. It's not that strong a concern right now, because you have us, and Dumbledore, looking out for your interests. If something was going on that we knew would concern you, we would tell you. But my point is that's not something you should count on. I know you're only sixteen, you're extremely busy and in love, and the paper can be boring. I'm not saying you have to take out a subscription tomorrow. Just something to keep in mind." He gave Harry a small smile. "End of lecture."

Harry chuckled. "I see your point. I'd never thought of it that way, of course. I guess I rely on other people too much for that, especially Hermione. Sometimes she reads me stuff from the paper that she thinks I should know. I have to admit I'm not that interested, and she can probably guess that. She hasn't done it that much lately."

"She knows, Harry," confirmed Neville. "I'm sitting across from her, I see her face. She reads you something, and you kind of listen politely and everything, but don't comment or ask questions, and I see her get annoyed sometimes. I think she doesn't say anything because it wasn't like you asked her to read it to you."

"I should apologize to her and ask her to keep doing it," said Harry. "I appreciate that she's trying to help me. I guess I take her for granted a bit too much sometimes."

"Yes, she thinks so too," agreed Neville, to a few smiles around the table. "Not that she massively complains about it, but she's said that it's always annoyed her a bit about you and Ron that you always sort of assume that she'll be there for help with homework and stuff like that. She doesn't mind doing it, of course, and she's not going to stop, but she'd like a little more appreciation, I guess."

"Hmmm, guess I should mention that too. Maybe I should try to do everything at once. Is there anything else you know of that she's not happy with me about?" Now the Aurors chuckled.

Neville thought. "No, not really. It's not that big a deal, Harry. You know how she feels about you, she'd forgive you much worse than that. These are just little things. But I know she'd appreciate it if you did talk to her about them."

"How is it going, Neville?" asked Tonks. "With you and her?"

Harry wondered if Neville would be comfortable answering the question in front of ten people, but the Aurors were very fond of Neville, which he assumed Neville knew. "Very well," Neville answered. "We're really happy. I don't get to spend as much time with her as I'd like, she studies so hard, she's always got things to do. Of course I study with her, and that's nice, but I'm looking forward to the summer."

"Have you had any fights, or arguments?"

"A few, but I wouldn't say 'fights,' it's not like there was yelling or anything. It's hard to get privacy at Hogwarts anyway. Thank goodness Harry's the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, sometimes we go to his classroom or office if we need to talk privately. We can't exactly have an argument in the common room. But there have been a few things, which turned out to be my fault," he said, grinning ruefully as the others chuckled. "They weren't serious, but at the time, I thought they were. It's taken me some time to get used to the idea that I'm not in danger of her breaking up with me every time she's upset with me about something. And she

got upset with me for thinking that, because it seemed to her like I don't take it seriously when she tells me how much she loves me, which she does a lot. So we've been through that a bit. But mostly it's going very well, and we're happy. Harry, I don't suppose that's a problem that you have, worrying that Ginny'll break up with you."

"No, I guess I haven't thought that much about it," Harry agreed. "I guess I have too many other things to worry about. But she's said she's worried about it at times, even though there's really no reason, it's not like we even had a fight or anything. I tell her it'll never happen, and she believes me, but I still think she worries."

"It's natural that she would, Harry, believe me," said Tonks. "We all have our insecure moments, sometimes we worry that someone better could come along and take our person away from us. And look who she has-someone who could attract virtually any girl near his age he wanted. She'll worry that you'll run across some girl who's beautiful and accomplished, see what you could have had, and dismiss her as a childish fling. Of course that's not going to happen," she said quickly, noting Harry's expression. "I'm just saying, in her insecure moments, she will think that. It almost has to happen." The other female Aurors nodded in agreement.

"What can I do to make sure she knows that won't happen?"

Cassandra shook her head sadly. "Nothing, Harry. You can tell her until you're blue in the face, and she'll know you mean it, but she'll worry that your feelings could change, and you wouldn't know it now. She'll think, it could happen, we never know what will happen in the future. Reassuring her often, and not getting annoyed when she expresses insecurity, will help. Time will fix this; the more time goes by, the more she'll get used to the idea that you'll always be together. Getting married wouldn't hurt, either."

Harry smiled. "What's a common age to get married, for wizards?"

"Wizards tend to get married younger than Muggles, we're not sure why," explained Cassandra. "I think the average age is about twenty or twenty-one. You can get married as young as seventeen, but it's kind of rare. At seventeen you're still at Hogwarts, and people like to wait until they're more free than that."

Harry considered this. "So, the earliest I can reasonably marry her is... I guess in a little over two years..."

"Planning it all out, are you?" asked a grinning Tonks. Neville's eyebrows were raised in surprise.

"All I know is that I want to be with her for the rest of my life, and I know that's what she wants too," Harry replied. "So I don't see any reason to do it later instead of sooner."

Now all the Aurors were grinning. "Romantic, yet practical," commented Tonks.

"Most people wait a bit, Harry, because they want to be sure. You're that sure?" asked Teddy. "I mean, you've only been together for a month and a half."

"Don't discourage him!" stage-whispered Tonks.

"But I've known her for a lot longer," Harry pointed out. "I've always really liked her, and I know what kind of person she is. And I know how I feel about her. If we have any problems, we'll deal with them. I don't see what more there is to think about, especially since we can't do anything for two years anyway. That ought to be plenty of time."

"Well, we think it's wonderful that you feel that way, Harry," said Tonks, looking at Teddy as if to demand that he say nothing more that was discouraging.

"But really, I think there's a lot to what Harry says," said Cassandra. "If you love the person and are determined, that counts for a lot. Things that could break up other couples won't break you up if you try hard. I think one thing we've noticed about Harry is that he doesn't give up."

"I'd give what she says a lot of weight, Harry," said Tonks. "She is that rare creature, a happily married Auror."

Harry could think of nothing more to say on the topic, so he didn't. Changing the subject, Teddy said, "I never did answer your question, Harry, about the penalty for unauthorized Apparation." Harry had forgotten that he'd asked. "For the first offense, it's a three-month suspension of one's Apparation license. For the second offense, it's a one-year suspension and two weeks' imprisonment. After that, it's a year's imprisonment. But people can get their sentences mitigated or struck if they choose to take Veritaserum and be questioned. If they genuinely didn't know, or thought it was a life-threatening emergency, they can get off. You know, I assume, that there's an exception in the law for life-threatening emergencies, which is why yours didn't get you in trouble."

"That reminds me, there's something I've always wondered about Veritaserum. Why is it not used in the courts, at trials? It would seem perfect for that."

"Not quite," answered Kingsley. "It's not foolproof. Veritaserum will make you accurately convey what you believe to be true, not what is true. Two people can genuinely remember the same event differently, and if you're a little off in the head, you can give totally false testimony under Veritaserum. The chances are very small, but enough that we can't just assume anything. Also, when you start forcing people to take it, you start down a treacherous road. That happened when it was developed a couple of hundred years ago. They started giving it to people based on nothing more than suspicion, or to see what they knew. They'd haul someone in off the street and give it to them just to see if they'd done anything illegal, if they looked disreputable."

Soon there was a scandal involving its use, and after that, there was a backlash against using it like that.

"The last time there was a debate about its use was fifteen years ago, after you survived Voldemort's Killing Curse, and he was driven off. As you know, people like Lucius Malfoy slipped back into respectable society, claiming they'd been bewitched, coerced, or put under the Imperius Curse. Many people suggested that Malfoy and others be given Veritaserum to confirm or refute their claims, feeling that what they were accused of justified it. Some people opposed it because they thought Voldemort was gone for good, and they could be re-integrated into society. A few, like Dumbledore, thought Voldemort would return, but opposed the Veritaserum anyway on grounds of principle. Eventually it was decided not to use it, but it was a heated debate."

"Interesting," Harry said, thinking. "If they had used it, the events with the Chamber of Secrets four years ago wouldn't have happened, because Lucius Malfoy would have been in Azkaban. But Voldemort would have come back anyway, because the people who helped him either weren't in Azkaban, or escaped."

"Well, some would say that an action is right or wrong regardless of the result, which can be in the hands of fate," pointed out Kingsley. "A rightly decided action can have terrible consequences, or a bad choice can have a good result. You have to judge the decision based on the information the people had at the time."

"But Professor McGonagall said that Professor Dumbledore would have been removed as headmaster if the bomb had killed a hundred students, but since it didn't, he stayed. But he made the same decision in either case. Why wouldn't he have just been judged on the decision, not its results?"

With a wry smile, Kingsley said, "That's why I used the words 'some would say,' Harry. Most people do judge actions based on the result. I don't think that's a good way to do it, and I think some people don't either. It's much easier to judge by results, but it's really not right, I think. People do it because it's easy."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. Even at lunchtime, I get an education, he thought.

Harry and Neville returned to Hogwarts in time for dinner, after which Harry continued his attempts to teach the way he did magic to his friends. Then they went back to the common room. Harry and Ginny enjoyed this time too, but they didn't break off to be more alone; they couldn't really be alone anyway, and they knew that if they did, and Hermione and Neville did too, then Ron would be alone. They didn't want that, so they stayed together. Sometimes Ron went off by himself to plan Quidditch strategy, but Harry wondered if he also wanted them to have more time as

couples. He felt unhappy that even if Ron and Pansy did get together, they wouldn't be able to hang out in the common room together.

At eleven o'clock, Harry changed into his nightclothes and started to relax in bed. He picked up *Reborn From the Ashes* and started reading where he'd left off. The section he was reading was about how phoenixes companion humans, and it contained the quote Hagrid had used in his class. Harry had already been told some of this information when Fawkes had chosen him, but it was still interesting to read. He went on to a section about the transition period from one companion to another: "The phoenix will sometimes bond with a new companion while the older one is still alive, but sometimes it will wait until the older one's death to make its choice known, even if it has already decided who the new companion will be. It is known that the phoenix is more likely to choose the new companion during the life of the older one if the two companions are acquainted, giving the older one a chance to pass on useful information. But sometimes the phoenix will wait if it intuits that foreknowledge of the older one's death will be unduly disturbing to him or her. This is because most phoenix companions are aware of the fact that the phoenix will not choose a new companion until it knows that the death of the older one is not far off, almost never more than a year away. As is often the case with phoenixes, humans do not know how the phoenix comes by this knowledge, but it is never incorrect. It is usually the case, of course, that a phoenix companion is one of sufficient strength of character and wisdom to truly grasp the inevitability of death, and not be unduly disturbed by it. The older companion often welcomes the information as an opportunity to tie up loose ends and get his or her affairs in order."

The paragraph continued, but Harry had stopped reading. A cold chill went through his body, and he felt fear. Did that say what I think it said? he asked himself, and read the section again. Not wanting to believe it, he read it a third time. No, no, no, no, his mind shouted. I can't accept this, I won't accept this. This book says that Professor Dumbledore is going to die within a half a year.

Impulsively, he picked up the book and headed out of Gryffindor Tower, not looking back or around to see who might have noticed. It was after eleven o'clock, well past the time anyone was supposed to be out roaming around, but Harry didn't care. Emotion rose up in him as he walked. He desperately wanted Dumbledore to tell him that the book was wrong or outdated, or that it didn't apply in this situation because of the urgency of Harry's need in September. But a part of him knew that would not happen.

He knocked on the door of Dumbledore's quarters; the door opened as Dumbledore got up from a chair and headed toward the door. Harry wordlessly lifted the book, preparing to open it to the page he'd read, but Dumbledore motioned him

to put it down. "I know why you are here, Harry," he said sadly. To Harry's inquiring look, he said, "Yes, I am sorry, but what the book says is true." Fawkes burst into view, sat on his perch, and started singing.

Harry stood unmoving as grief washed over him. He found it hard to process what Dumbledore had said, simple though it was. Dumbledore stepped forward and took Harry into his arms, holding him. Finally, Harry's grief burst forth, and he started sobbing, his head on Dumbledore's shoulder. He held Dumbledore tightly, as if he could prevent his death by not letting him go. He cried and held him for a few minutes. When Harry stopped, Dumbledore gently guided him to his sofa, where they sat down.

"You can't die, sir, you just can't..." Harry said in desperation.

"I know this will be of little solace to you, Harry, but I am content. I am eighty-four years old, well past normal life expectancy, as I have mentioned to you. We all must go sometime, and I consider it just as well to go while I still possess all my faculties. My greatest regret, of course, is leaving you so soon after establishing this bond with you, which is precious to me. For your sake, I would prefer to stay longer. But for my own, it is not so important."

Harry was tearing up again. "I'm sorry, sir, I don't think I can deal with this. I mean, I loved Sirius, and then I lost him, way too soon. Now you, too... you mean as much to me as he did. It's not fair." He realized as he said it that he sounded like a six-year-old, but he didn't care. Life isn't fair, his mind told him.

Dumbledore, of course, did not say that. "I know, Harry. I fear there is nothing I can say that will give you any comfort. But I love you, and I will always, even after I am gone."

"So you think there's someplace that you'll still exist from, even after you die?" Harry asked, sniffing.

"Yes, Harry, I do," replied Dumbledore. "You may recall that we touched on this subject during our chat after the dinner we had before the start of the term, when we were discussing the Veil of Mystery. I told you that I believed that the Veil led to a sort of way-station between our physical realm and that which awaits us beyond. I am as certain as I can be, without having experienced it personally, that this is true. I have spent some time this year talking to mystics from various countries and cultures, exchanging ideas and seeking their guidance. I have enough information to reach what I feel is an informed conclusion on the matter. I am confident that we proceed elsewhere, and that the spirit is eternal. I can tell you more about this, and I can also refer you to some books which espouse the same information that I am sure is true."

"I recognize that this will help you little, in that you will miss me all the same, whether my spirit survives or not. But it may help if you think of me not so much as being dead, but rather, elsewhere. I told you what I did at that time in the hope that when I did have to tell you this-and I would have told you before it happened-you would feel less despair over the prospect. I still hope that may be the case. I know that the finding out is a shock, but at least you have time to adapt to it somewhat before the event occurs."

"Do you know when and how it will happen, sir? I mean, you seem fine right now. Do you have some disease, or...?"

"No, Harry. As of now, I am fine. Yes, I do know how, and I know roughly when."

"Wait a minute, sir." Something had clicked in Harry's head, despite his grief. "You said... you knew about this when we had that dinner? But Fawkes hadn't chosen me yet, then. How could you have known?"

Dumbledore nodded. "I was coming to that soon. But before I discuss that, there is another person who should be present." Dumbledore took out his wand and summoned the golden dog, which went trotting off. "I am very sorry that this had to happen, Harry. I have benefited greatly from your company, and your love, this year. I know I will not be replaceable to you, but I am comforted that you will never suffer from a lack of love. You now have Ginny, in whose eyes I see as much love as you could ever hope for from another person. You are loved greatly by your other four friends as well, as you know. You also receive the affection and respect of the Hogwarts teachers and students, and now the Aurors as well. I am confident that you will flourish after I am gone." Just as Dumbledore finished speaking, there was a knock on the door. Dumbledore stood, clearly surprised that it had happened so soon. He walked toward the door as he opened it with his wand, Harry behind him.

Hermione walked in, eyes wide. "I was most of the way here already when I saw the dog," she said. She walked to Harry and put her arms around him. "I'm sorry, Harry. I've known since December. I got you that phoenix book for Christmas, and I decided to read it before I gave it to you. Afterwards, I decided to get you something else instead. I didn't see the point in you knowing all year, grieving all year."

"I understand," said Harry through new tears as she held him. "I can't say for sure that I would have wanted to know."

She let go, and stepped over to hug Dumbledore. "I'll miss you so much, sir," she said.

"Thank you, Hermione. But I wonder, how did you know to come here before you saw the dog?"

"I knew Harry bought the book, sir, and I knew he'd find this part eventually. I also know about what time he usually reads non-schoolbooks. I saw him leave his dormitory with the book, so I knew that he'd found it. I just wanted to... help comfort him, if I could. I was surprised to see the dog. Why did you send it for me?"

"There is something I knew I would be showing the two of you sometime soon, at the time I felt it right to warn you of what was to come. That time is obviously here, so it is as well that you know." The door opened, and the Pensieve came floating into the room, obviously Summoned by Dumbledore from his office.

"There was a prophecy given to me earlier this year which I will now show you. It is, Harry, the reason I knew of my fate even before Fawkes bonded with you." With his wand he caused an image to extrude from the top of the Pensieve as he had last year to show Harry the prophecy Voldemort had sought. The image was of Professor Trelawney, sitting in Dumbledore's office across the desk from him. Her head was tilted back and her jaw was slack, as Harry remembered her look when giving the prophecy she had near the end of his third year. Dumbledore moved his wand, and the image spoke:

"The endgame draws near; the white pieces are on their proper squares, poised. As summer dawns, the game can be won, in one and only one fashion. White must sacrifice the queen; by so doing, the rook may place the Black king in check. The king will escape, but this will allow the white bishop the opportunity to later deliver checkmate. For White, there is no other path to victory." The image faded from the top of the Pensieve.

Harry looked very puzzled, his grief temporarily abated. "You should have called Ron," he said. "This sounds more like a chess problem than a prophecy."

"Yes, indeed it does, Harry. Hermione, I would be most interested in your opinion."

"I guess we have to assume that, like the other prophecies, this has to do with the battle against Voldemort," she said, thinking out loud. "Then I guess we would be white, and Voldemort, the black king. Sir, did you ever play chess on a life-size board, as one of the pieces?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Very astute. Yes, Hermione, one time. I was the queen."

"That makes it make sense," she said, sounding more sure. "Harry, you remember when we were going to get the Sorcerer's Stone, we had to be the pieces in that game..."

Harry nodded, remembering. "I was a bishop, you were a rook. Wait, you think that's us, you and I, being referred to in the prophecy? Couldn't it be other people who played chess like he did?"

"It could, Harry," conceded Dumbledore, "but the situation strongly suggests, nearly demands, that it be the two of you. It is suggested that you, Harry, the bishop, may checkmate the black king, Voldemort. That possibility has, of course, been prophesied before, so that is consistent. The fact that you are the bishop almost certainly means that Hermione is the rook."

"But what does Hermione have to do with this?" asked Harry, still confused.

"Harry," said Dumbledore seriously, "I know it is difficult to know only half a secret. You, Hermione, and I have crucial roles to play in what is to come. I know my role and hers; yours still cannot be discerned with any certainty, but we know it involves the final defeat of Voldemort. But it is also crucial that she not know my role, and that you not know mine or hers. I am very sorry, but it must be that way; for you to know would place all that could happen in jeopardy, destroying our only chance to defeat Voldemort. You must not know, you must not make attempts to guess. Even if it is frustrating, I believe you can understand the necessity."

"Yes, sir, I can understand that," he said. The thought of having only one chance to defeat Voldemort had sobered him considerably. "But Hermione knows her own role, too, right?"

Hermione looked pale. "Yes, I do. I mean, I didn't know that it was going to be me to do it, but I know what I'm supposed to do."

Harry saw that she was frightened, and was concerned. "But she's not going to die, is she? She'll be all right?"

Dumbledore somberly met Harry's gaze. "The future is not written, Harry. The prophecies merely point a path. All we know is that while my death is necessary to accomplish our ends, hers is not, as there is no reference to it in the prophecy."

"Harry," she said, turning to him and gently gripping his shoulders. "You have to remember one thing: you're the only one who can beat Voldemort. If it happens that you can sacrifice your life to save mine... don't do it. You can't. Thousands could die who wouldn't otherwise. I know this is horrible for you to think about, but you have to promise me."

Tears pressed against him yet again. "How can I promise that?" he asked, his voice cracking. "How could I watch you die? How could I live with myself, ever look at Neville again? I don't think I could do it, Hermione."

She looked desperate and earnest. "Neville knew what he was getting into, just like Ginny did. He would never blame you, he knows what I would want. I don't want to leave him, I pray that it won't happen. But we have to think about the big picture. Think about the consequences of not defeating Voldemort. There's just no choice."

"But remember what he said. I don't have to die, and to be honest, I don't think I will. The prophecy says I don't have to die, and I can't do what I need to if

I'm dead. So I really do think I'll be okay. But the point is, under no circumstances can you die. If you need extra motivation to stay alive even if you'd rather sacrifice yourself, think of Ginny. If not for the thousands you don't know, then stay alive for her."

Harry could not escape the logic of that, though he desperately wanted to. He couldn't bear the thought of leaving Ginny behind. He knew how he felt about Dumbledore leaving, and though he knew that Dumbledore didn't have that many years remaining anyway, it was still terrible. He knew how many years he could have with Ginny, and it made him want to stay alive more than ever. He just didn't want it to be at Hermione's expense. He hugged her and said, "I want you to stay alive for Neville, just like I want to for Ginny. But I understand what you're saying. All I can say is I'll try. I know what's at stake. But you know how hard it would be, if our positions were reversed."

She nodded, holding him. "Yes, I know. But it has to be that way. And again, I do think I'll be okay. Just hang on to that thought. I will."

They separated. Harry looked at Dumbledore, and the thought of Dumbledore's fate hit him with full force again, which Dumbledore noticed. "Harry, the events in question will not occur for at least five weeks. I hope that for that time, when you look at me, it will not be as though I am already gone. I hope it will be with the pleasure of my companionship, for however long we have the opportunity."

"Of course, you're right. I think I can do that. It's just... kind of a shock... but I suppose it's better to know now, than be surprised when it happens."

Dumbledore nodded. "I agree, Harry. Believe me, I would have told you before the time came. To be honest, I am glad that my death can accomplish such a purpose as this; it somehow seems more worthwhile than simply passing away in one's sleep. And as the book suggests, I have been able to spend the year preparing things. I am truly not disturbed, Harry. I know what will happen to me, I know that I will be fine."

Harry hoped that was true; for now, he would take Dumbledore's word for it. "When did you get this prophecy, sir?"

"Interestingly, it was on your sixteenth birthday. I was just seeing Sybil out of my office when you and Remus arrived. You may recall that I had to store some thoughts in the Pensieve before I could talk to you; I wanted to make sure that I forgot nothing. It was around that time that I suggested to Fawkes that he find a new companion, and mentioned you as a possibility. Not that he needed my advice, of course, but I know he respects me and welcomes it. He is sad that I must go, but he understands."

"Who else at the school knows, sir?" asked Hermione. "I mean, Hagrid does, of course. I went to talk to him about it when I found out, we were both crying. You

know how Hagrid is, and you know how much he loves you. It was good to be able to talk to him about it. But who else knows? I'm almost surprised it wasn't public knowledge."

"Yes, Hermione, I was surprised myself that it was not mentioned in the Prophet, when the bond with Harry became known. I suppose those in the wizarding world who knew decided to not go out of their way to publicize it, which was thoughtful of them. As for the school, Professor McGonagall knew this about phoenixes, so she knew immediately, though she and Professor Snape had already been told of the prophecy. Except for Hagrid, I believe no other teacher knows as yet. As for students, the only one of whom I am aware that knows is Miss Abbott, who seems to have already been especially interested in phoenixes. Since becoming a prefect, she has visited me twice for the purpose of talking to and admiring Fawkes, and after Fawkes chose Harry, she came to express her condolences. I told her that they are more properly directed toward those I leave behind, but I appreciated her concern, and her discretion."

"Sir," said Harry, squeezing Dumbledore a bit harder as he spoke, "I'm glad that you're not bothered for you, but I'm still pretty bothered for me. I feel bad that I didn't spend more time with you this year than I did."

Amused, Dumbledore shook his head. "You have been very busy, Harry. I am glad we did spend as much time together as we have."

"I know, sir, me too, but you know what I mean... there's so much that I don't know... can you tell me, sir, were you ever married?"

Dumbledore led Harry and Hermione over to the sofa, and they all sat down. "Yes, I was. My wife's name was Agnes, she passed away sixteen years ago. She was seven years older than I. We never had any children, a matter of some regret to both of us, but we were content, because we had each other."

"You said sixteen years ago, sir," pointed out Harry. "It wasn't because..."

"No, it was not. She passed away from natural causes shortly before your encounter with Voldemort. But losing her at such an otherwise stressful time was very difficult."

Hermione nodded somberly. "I can imagine, sir. Would you tell us about her? What was she like?"

Harry felt like he and Hermione were a brother and sister being told bedtime stories by a kindly grandparent, but he didn't mind the comparison. He just wanted to be with Dumbledore, to be comforted. Hermione put her arms around Harry's stomach from behind and held on; he put his hands on hers. Dumbledore started telling them about his wife and their experiences, Harry and Hermione listening

avidly. Dumbledore talked for more than an hour, finally suggesting at one o'clock that they go to sleep.

"Sir, I'll never be able to sleep if I go back to my dormitory, I know it," Harry said. "I'll just be thinking about this all night."

"I understand, Harry. I have a quantity of the liquid Madam Pomfrey uses to induce sleep. You drink some, and stay here tonight. Hermione, you are welcome to stay too, if you like."

"Thank you, sir," she said. "Yes, I'd like to stay with Harry."

Dumbledore moved aside the chairs and sofa with his wand, then conjured up two comfortable-looking beds, with blankets and pillows. "You'll have to teach me how to do that, sir," said Harry, impressed.

"I will be happy to," chuckled Dumbledore. "It is not so difficult, really."

Harry and Hermione started to get into their beds. "I wondered, sir, why don't all wizards make their own furniture, just conjure it up?" He recalled that some of the Weasleys' furniture was showing its age, and wondered why they didn't conjure up their own.

"Wizards can conjure physical items, but they are not permanent," explained Dumbledore. Harry glanced at Hermione, and saw from her expression that she knew, but was trying not to interrupt. "Recall the leprechaun gold. The length the item remains solid depends on the wizard's strength; items I conjure tend to remain for as long as sixty hours. One could live in a home whose furnishings were entirely conjured, it would simply be inconvenient to have to keep doing it."

Harry chuckled, imagining sitting in a chair and having it disappear. Dumbledore handed him a small glass of liquid. "I will wake you at seven-thirty, as you have a Quidditch match tomorrow." Much like a grandparent, Harry thought, Dumbledore leaned over and kissed Harry on the cheek, then Hermione, before heading into his bedroom.

"I'd totally forgotten about the Quidditch match," Harry said, leaning on his side facing Hermione. "It'll decide the Quidditch Cup, and normally I'd be all excited about it. Now, I don't even care. It just seems so unimportant."

"Well, now you know how I feel all the time," joked Hermione. Harry managed a small smile. "I know, Harry, but remember, it's important to your teammates, two of whom are also people you love. You'll want to do well, for them."

"I'll miss him so much, Hermione..." The thought prompted feelings of despair, which showed on his face. She looked at him with compassion, and reached for his free hand. "You especially, Harry, but the rest of us too. But he's right, he wouldn't have had that much longer, and he gets to accomplish something important. When your time comes, you could do worse than to go out that way, at the same age. It

might help if you think about how you can help him in the next five weeks. Spend time with him, talk to him, learn more from him. He loves you so much, Harry, it'll make him happy to feel he got to be with you as much as possible. Don't mourn him when you're with him, but be happy that you get to be with him, and him with you. Don't waste these five weeks."

Harry nodded. She was right, as usual. He decided to try hard to do as she had suggested. "Thank you, Hermione. I don't know what I would do without you."

She smiled. "I don't plan to ever let you find out. Now, drink that, and go to sleep. You're only going to get six hours' sleep as it is."

He felt like he wanted to talk to her for longer, but he knew she was right about this, too. He drank the liquid, lay back, and thought of Ginny. He visualized her eyes, full of love for him. Thinking about that, he quickly dropped off to sleep.

Dumbledore was gently shaking his shoulder. "It is seven-thirty, Harry," he said.

Harry looked around, momentarily surprised to find himself in Dumbledore's quarters. He remembered why he was there; he saw Hermione, already up, sitting in a chair and reading a book. He sat up, then stood and hugged Dumbledore, who chuckled. "I suppose I should expect more of that over the next few weeks, which also pleases me." He released Harry and gave him a loving look. "You should get down to breakfast, though. And Harry, please come to see me after the matches, and ask Ginny to come as well."

Harry felt like making a joke. "Oh, good, sir, you're going to marry us?"

Dumbledore and Hermione both laughed. "It would be a privilege, but for the fact that she is too young, and I lack the legal authority. I am pleased, though, that you are thinking in those terms. No, we have things to do at the Burrow, to make preparations for the security arrangements. My rational rationale, if I may, is that her presence may maximize your magical ability, though I know she need not be in your presence for her love to inspire you. The other reason is that it will please you, and her parents."

"I especially like the second reason," agreed Harry. Remembering that he had brought the phoenix book last night, he looked around for it, and saw it on a counter. Before picking it up, though, he looked at Dumbledore and said, "I want to thank you, Albus, for last night. I'm still sad, and I'm sure I will be, but you helped so much. You made me feel a lot better."

"I am very glad, Harry," said Dumbledore simply. Harry nodded, picked up the book, and left with Hermione.

They walked toward the Great Hall. "And you made me feel a lot better, too," he said, putting an arm around her. "It's so like you, to figure out what was going on and going to help. Thank you so much. Last night, I felt like we were his grandchildren, listening to him tell stories."

She smiled. "I felt that way too. At one point, I thought of asking for hot chocolate."

Harry chuckled. "That would have been nice." He was about to continue, but at the end of the corridor ahead, he saw Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Pansy heading for them. He handed the book to Hermione and ran forward, stopping just in front of a surprised Ginny, who he hugged tightly. The other three looked bewildered, and Ginny said, "Harry, what-"

Harry cut her off. "We need to go to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, now," he said to all of them.

"Harry, there's not much time left for breakfast," protested Ron. "I mean, I've already eaten, but-"

Harry glared at him, letting Ron know that he would accept no argument. He started walking in the direction of the classroom, and the others followed. "Or, we could go to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom," muttered Ron, resigned but annoyed at not knowing the reason. They walked in silence the rest of the way, Harry holding Ginny's hand. Upon arriving, Harry quickly moved aside the fourteen extra desks and arranged the other six in a circle, and they sat down.

"I was reading this book about phoenixes last night, and I came to this section," he said. He then read the section. Seeing their expressions, he said, "I was really hoping he would tell me something like it didn't apply in this case, but he couldn't. He's known since it happened. He thinks he's got less than two months. Not a disease or anything, just something's going to happen."

The others looked at Harry with intense sympathy. Ginny got up and stood behind him, leaning over and hugging him around the neck. "Oh, Harry..."

Hermione continued the story, explaining how she ended up there and talking about the conversation they'd had, but avoiding any mention of the newest prophecy. "So, he gave Harry something to make him sleep, and he conjured up beds for us. Harry fell asleep right away, it took me another hour or so. He was so good, made us feel better, you know how he is."

"I'm really sorry, mate," said Ron.

Fighting back tears, Pansy nodded. "I haven't even spent that much time with him, but look at me. He's been really good to me. Good to everyone, it seems. I'm so sorry, Harry, this is terrible. This must hurt so much."

Harry nodded, leaning his head back next to Ginny's. "It does. I'm going to miss him a lot. But there's still some time, so like Hermione said to me, I don't want to waste it. I want to spend more with him, while he's still around. I think he knows I want to, and he wants me to also."

Ginny kissed him on the cheek and said, "You should spend whatever time you want to, even if you would have spent it with me instead. I want you to. You'll have me for years, you're not getting rid of me. Be with him while you can."

"I really want to be with you, Ginny, but I know what you mean, and I will. Maybe you and I can both go see him sometimes, I think he'd like that."

Ron shook his head. "Funny, ten minutes ago, nothing was more important than this match. Now... it's just hard to get worked up." Ginny nodded her agreement.

"I thought the same thing, Ron," said Harry. "But I want to win. Not for him exactly, I don't think he cares who wins... but just for the idea of doing my best, which I'm sure he would want. Also, just so you know, we shouldn't tell anyone else about this, that's why I wanted to come here. I don't think he wants the whole school knowing."

They got up, and Harry put the desks back into their standard positions before they left. Pansy put an arm around him; he thanked her. They headed out to the Great Hall, each lost in thought.

Ron gave no speech after the team changed into their Quidditch uniforms. He just nodded at them, and they marched off to the pitch. The Slytherin-Hufflepuff match would be first, and they would watch from the areas on the sidelines reserved for the teams not playing yet.

They sat down on the benches. "Anybody care who wins?" asked Ron. He got no responses. "Yeah, me neither," he agreed. "Still, we should watch carefully, especially Hufflepuff. They looked pretty good in the first match against Ravenclaw, so they may be the ones we have to watch out for next year."

"And there's no point in watching Slytherin especially carefully," said Dennis. "They replaced Crabbe and Goyle with two seventh year girls, so except for Dalton, the entire team is seventh years. Next year, it's going to be basically a whole new team."

"How are they going to choose a new team?" asked Katie. "Snape doesn't know anything about Quidditch, he'll never be able to choose."

"Interesting question," said Ron. "Maybe they'll have Madam Hooch do it."

Dumbledore stepped forward. "Thank you for coming out today. First, let me again thank the Aurors flying around the pitch for their efforts in providing extra security." The crowd applauded them politely.

"Next," he continued, "In the previous two days of Quidditch, I have at this time announced the presence of a magic-detection field on the pitch. That field is not up today, as there is no reason for it. I did not plan to put it up for the first matches in October, but an hour before those matches, Pansy Parkinson came to me to warn me of the danger that Harry Potter faced from the Confundus Beam. Her warning saved Harry from prolonged exposure and very likely injury, and I'm sure you all join me in thanking her."

Leaping to his feet along with the rest of the team, Harry vigorously applauded, looking for Pansy in the crowd. He found her between the Slytherin and Gryffindor sections, with Neville and Hermione, her head in her hands. The whole crowd was applauding enthusiastically. He saw Hermione put an arm around her shoulders and say something to her. She looked up, saw Harry, and blew him a kiss. Harry and his teammates laughed, along with those of the crowd who'd seen it. He did the same in response, mentally thanking Dumbledore.

"Madam Hooch?" said Dumbledore, gesturing to her and walking off the pitch. She had the captains shake hands, and the match got underway. Harry didn't care who won, but he watched with interest anyway. Occasionally he would think of Dumbledore. Once, Ginny looked at him while he was, and he looked back. "Not hard to see what you're thinking," she said quietly. "My poor Harry." He mouthed the words 'I love you' to her, which she did in return. They had started doing that more in the past few weeks in response to the normal lack of privacy at Hogwarts.

As most of the Gryffindor team expected, Hufflepuff was the superior team, scoring eleven goals to Slytherin's three. However, Dalton got the Snitch at the end of an exciting race with the Hufflepuff Seeker, pulling out the win for Slytherin. "Well, I have a feeling Hufflepuff will be looking for a new Seeker next year," commented Ginny. "I mean, all year they had a goal differential of..."

"Plus sixteen," Ron supplied.

"So, they scored twenty-three goals to the opposition's seven, but they lost all three matches," Ginny continued. "I kind of can't help remembering what Hermione said in October. Getting the Snitch certainly is all-important."

"Well, that's what we have Harry for," said Ron with certainty. Harry wished he could be as certain as Ron.

After Colin's Star of the Match interview with Dalton, the Gryffindor team headed out to the field. The two teams stood near each other, waiting for Madam Hooch to get the match underway. Harry found himself near Cho, and walked over. "Hi, Cho," he said. "Nervous?"

She shook her head casually. "Not at all. You?"

"Just another match," he said, the same way. They both smiled.

"Oh, I meant to do this after I got out of the Chamber, and I didn't," he said. "I was going to do what you said back in September, after the scroll, and tell you that you were right. You knew it better than I did."

"I really hope it works out, Harry," she said sincerely.

"Thanks, Cho. I appreciate it."

Madam Hooch asked the captains to shake hands, and Harry and Cho separated, and mounted their brooms. The whistle sounded, and everyone took off. Harry listened for Colin's commentary.

"Ginny reaches the Quaffle first, and she speeds for the goal... she scores! Oh, my, she just blew right by Rowan, who didn't seem to be ready. But how can you be ready for a Firebolt? Gryffindor leads, ten-zero. Boot with the Quaffle, passes to Stanton, over to Corner, back to Boot, he shoots, blocked by Ron, who passes out to Bell... Just a quick note, I'm using Ron and Ginny Weasley's first names, otherwise I have to keep saying their full names, which is a waste- and there's Ginny, speeding past the Ravenclaw defense again, shoots, it's in! Twenty-zero! Oh, dear, Ravenclaw is going to have to adjust fast, or it'll be a long morning for them... Potter high up, in his standard search pattern, while Chang is flying all over, in no particular pattern, it should be interesting to see what happens with that... Boot to Corner, off to- intercepted by Creevey, hands it off to Ginny, who's already past the Ravenclaw defenders, shoots, it's in! Rowan just can't seem to react fast enough to the Firebolt's speed. Boot streaks down the field, Creevey on him, Boot shoots, Creevey gets in the way, and it bounces off him before Ron has a chance at it! Ron flies down and catches it, passes to Creevey, off to Bell, she's down the field near the goal, passes back to Ginny zooming in, fakes out Rowan and scores! She fainted right and went down the middle, and it's forty-zero Gryffindor in the first two minutes..."

In his search pattern, Harry could see nothing. He saw Cho flying around randomly, and for some reason he felt nervous that she would reach it before him, even though he was covering the space more efficiently than she was.

He thought about what Dumbledore had said about Pansy, and then about Dumbledore in general. It had been about thirty seconds before he realized that he was still flying his usual search pattern, but had been so occupied in his thoughts that he had not been looking for the Snitch at all. He kicked himself mentally and started focusing on the Snitch again.

After five more minutes, Gryffindor was leading by eighty-zero, and Harry was no nearer finding the Snitch. Don't get impatient, he told himself, it hasn't been that long, it just seems that way because Ginny's scoring so many goals. Keep calm, that's what Dumbledore would do, he used to play Quidditch, I'm sure he...

A minute later, Harry realized that he had done it again. What brought him out of it was a quick motion from the Snitch in his field of vision; it was gone now, but he had the sense that it was there a few seconds ago, ready to be taken, but he just hadn't been looking. Why did the damn match have to be today, he thought, how can I concentrate when this person I love so much is going to die soon? Concentrate now, you moron, he told himself, he would want you to. Shaking his head, he headed down the field.

When he got fairly near the Gryffindor goal, Ron shouted at him, "Harry! Over here!" Surprised, Harry flew over; no one had ever tried to have a conversation with him during a match before. Ron said, "Harry, I want you to follow Cho, keep as tight to her as you can. Your job is to stop her from getting the Snitch."

Harry flushed with shame; Ron had obviously noticed him not concentrating, and thought he had a better chance of seeing the Snitch by following Cho. He was surprised at Ron's lack of confidence, but at the same time, he felt he deserved it. Still, he said, "No, Ron, really, don't do that. I can do better."

Ron looked at him as if he had spoken a foreign language. "What are you talking about? This has nothing to do with-" Ron stopped talking as Boot came at him with the Quaffle, readied himself, and blocked the shot. As Cho flew near, Ron held onto the Quaffle a few seconds longer than he had to. "Get moving, Harry!" he shouted. He passed the Quaffle to Katie.

Harry was still unhappy. "Look, Ron, I don't think we have to do-"

As Cho flew off, Ron shouted impatiently, "Harry, we don't have time to argue! Just do what I said!" Harry shot Ron an angry glance and flew off. He located Cho halfway down the field. He glanced up and saw that the score was now one hundred-zero Gryffindor; he hadn't noticed the last two goals. He started listening to Colin again as he gained on Cho.

"...and what some of you may have heard was Gryffindor captain Ron Weasley giving instructions to Seeker Harry Potter, who was obviously not happy with the instructions... Ginny up from below, to Bell, back to Ginny, she scores yet again, she's scored all eleven Gryffindor goals, the match is still a shutout..."

Harry caught up with Cho, still angry at Ron, still confident he would be able to get the Snitch himself if he tried harder. He knew that he was angry because he was embarrassed, but it didn't make him less angry. He flew alongside Cho; she took a hard left, he instantly turned to follow. She dove for five seconds, then flattened out; again, he kept pace, never more than a few yards away from her. Side by side now, to his surprise, she gave him a little smile. "Why were you arguing with Ron, Harry? I was wondering when you were going to start doing this."

Harry was now very puzzled; how could Cho have noticed him losing his concentration? He kept with her, but kept an ear on Colin's commentary, which now mentioned him more prominently.

"...and another great save for Ron, he's having a fantastic match, as is his sister... Potter sticks with Chang like glue, okay, for those of you not so familiar with Quidditch strategy, let me explain what's going on here. Gryffindor is ahead by one hundred ten points-sorry, one hundred twenty, another goal from Ginny-and it looks like the only way for Ravenclaw to win is for Chang to get the Snitch before Gryffindor takes a lead of one hundred sixty or more. Ron obviously instructed Potter to follow Chang closely and do whatever he can to make sure she doesn't get the Snitch. I'm not sure why Potter objected, it's a fairly straightforward strategy move. My guess-another good save by Ron-is that Potter doesn't think it's sporting, doesn't want to win that way. He'd rather find the Snitch by himself, not win by preventing Chang from getting it. That's an admirable attitude, but Ron is right, in sports, you do what you have to to win, if it's legal, which what Potter is doing is. Getting back to the action..."

Harry was now even more embarrassed; now that Colin had said it, it was totally obvious, but he was so focused on his embarrassment that it hadn't occurred to him. Boy, this is my worst match ever, he thought. Lucky Ron and Ginny are having such good ones, might make up for me.

As these thoughts went through his head, Cho glanced at him affectionately. "Colin's right, Harry, so is Ron. You have to do this. I mean, I'm not happy about it, but it's the thing to do."

Harry was following her so closely it was easy to have a conversation with her, but he was still trying to look for the Snitch and keep close to her at the same time. "I'd just rather find it myself. I hated it when Malfoy did this to me," he said, with words that were not untruthful, but conveying an impression that was. He could hardly admit to her that he had been having trouble concentrating, and he appreciated Colin's unwitting assistance.

"That's so you, Harry," she said, twisting away from him; he caught her again a few seconds later. "But this is really different, you know that. Malfoy just followed you because he knew you'd find the Snitch faster than him, and he wanted to knock you off your broom or whatever. Here, this is the right strategy move. And I know I'm never going to lose you, with your reflexes and that Firebolt. I practically have to have the Snitch jump up in front of me, to get it right now."

That made him feel bad, as well. "I admit, I don't like the idea that we'll win because of better equipment," he said. "I mean, look at what Ginny's doing. She's good, but I don't think she'd be doing that if not for the Firebolt."

"That's what you get for being generous, Harry," she teased him as she turned right; he easily kept pace. "I was wondering, why did you do that?"

"I knew it would make him really happy. I just wanted to."

Cho chuckled. "Boy, was I stupid."

Harry looked at her quizzically, then realized what she meant. "C'mon, Cho, you know that's not true. I just made you think of Cedric too much, that wasn't anybody's fault."

"I was only kidding, Harry. Well, half-kidding, anyway. I didn't like you because you were generous, just because, you know, of how you are. I should have given myself more time to get over Cedric." He tried to concentrate on looking for the Snitch and listen to her at the same time. "Can I ask you, Harry, why did you like me?"

He answered almost without thinking, so hard was he concentrating. "Because you're really pretty, and nice. Even when I first played against you, in third year, I got all nervous every time I looked at you, like somebody was going to see what I was thinking." Harry was now paying no attention to the rest of the match, or what Colin was saying.

"That's so sweet, Harry, thank you," she said, still looking for the Snitch. "I liked you too, you know, even then. I just sort of fell for Cedric first. I felt really bad when I had to turn you down for the Triwizard Ball."

"Not as bad as I felt, I'll bet," he said. "But you were nice about it. I just took too long. I wanted to ask you right away, I was just too nervous. It was too late by the time I did."

"You know, Harry, I really was just teasing you. I only did it because people tease me, like, how did you let him get away? But I've seen how you are with Ginny, I see how you look at each other. I don't think I've ever seen two people who love each other like you do. Did you know that everybody talks about it, how you two are, how you say 'I love you' to each other without sound, as if people couldn't figure out what you were saying?"

Harry went a light crimson. "Ah, I see you didn't know," she chuckled. "Well, I think it's sweet, you shouldn't stop doing it. But my point was, I don't know if you would have been like that with me. You're just so comfortable with her, you weren't like that with me. I do think these things happen for a reason. I'm sure I'll find someone. Maybe not a living legend who has his own Chocolate Frog card, but I'm sure there's someone who I'll love and who'll love me."

"I'm sure of that too, Cho," he said, still scanning for the Snitch. "And thank you for what you said about Ginny and I. I didn't know we were quite that obvious, but in a big way, I don't care. I feel how I feel."

"I know, that's what makes it so cute," said Cho. "And everyone knows what's your favorite couples' place to go to, the one near the lake."

"Did you really have to tell me that?" he asked plaintively, and she laughed. "I mean, I already think everyone's looking at me because I'm Harry Potter. Now I'm just going to—"

"Don't worry about it, Harry," she admonished him. "People just like to talk, it doesn't mean they don't like you or respect you. They know you need to be alone sometimes, it's no big deal."

"That was what Ginny said, the first time we went," Harry admitted. "But I doubt that she knew that people were going to be keeping track of us."

"Yeah, I heard you're not too crazy about being a celebrity," she said. "But remember, to us you may be a celebrity, but you're also an incredibly brave wizard who's going to help beat Voldemort someday, not to mention a nice person. The people who know you don't think of you as a celebrity."

"Thanks, Cho." He suddenly heard Ron shouting at him from quite a distance. "Why's Ron yelling at me?" he wondered aloud.

"Well, let's find out," she said, and swung around, heading in his direction. As they approached Ron, coming down from a higher position, he shouted, "Harry, couldn't you hear me? Colin even mentioned I was trying to talk to you. You can go off on your own again if you want to." Cho swung around again, but Harry continued to follow her. He glanced up at the scoreboard; the score was now one hundred ninety to zero.

Cho caught Harry's surprised look and smiled. "He's been trying to get your attention since it was one hundred sixty to zero. I kept you at the other end because I was enjoying talking to you, didn't want you to go away yet."

Harry smiled broadly. "That's probably the sneakiest compliment I've ever gotten. I guess I should go off by myself, people are going to think I'm being unsportsmanlike."

"I could grab your broom, make you stay," she joked. "Okay, go ahead, if you want to."

"Thanks again, Cho. You really took my mind off the match, and right now, that was a good thing." He flew off toward the Gryffindor side again, and resumed his normal search. Two goals later, with Gryffindor leading by two hundred ten to zero, he saw Cho dive at the Ravenclaw end. He headed that way, but it was much too far. She zoomed down and caught the Snitch, Madam Pomfrey blew the whistle, and the match was over. "Cho Chang captures the Snitch, and Gryffindor wins, by a score of two hundred ten to one hundred fifty," announced Colin. "Gryffindor wins its third consecutive Quidditch Cup."

The Gryffindors landed, and met in the center of the pitch. They had a kind of group hug as the crowd cheered. They separated into individual hugs. Harry was hugged by Katie, and found Ron waiting for him. As they hugged, Harry said, "I'm sorry, Ron, I was being stupid."

"What was the problem, anyway?" Ron asked.

"I'll tell you later," Harry answered, breaking off from Ron to hug Ginny. They headed towards the sidelines, still congratulating each other. Colin was saying, "Well, friends, there were obviously two Stars of the Match for Gryffindor today, and whichever one I pick, I do a disservice to the other. Ron had a brilliant sixteen-save shutout, and Ginny scored a phenomenal twenty-one goals and had seven steals. Let me see if I have a Galleon to flip... no, I don't. Bad luck. Ron Weasley, would you come up here please?"

Ron shrugged and headed off, as the crowd applauded. Harry kept his arm around Ginny, enjoying the excuse to be affectionate with her openly. Ron sat down next to Colin as his teammates watched.

"First, let me say congratulations, Ron, to you and your teammates."

"Thank you, Colin," said Ron. "You know, I think you did my sister a disservice by not choosing her as Star of the Match." This got some laughs from the crowd, as well as Colin.

"I think you're right, Ron," Colin cheerfully agreed. "That was an amazing match. For you, even better than the one that won you the championship last year. How did you manage not to let a single goal score?"

"I don't know how to explain it, Colin," Ron said. "I was just really focused, and when I guessed, I guessed right. It'll probably never happen again just like that."

"Your sister Ginny's performance was also amazing; I think the twenty-one goals and seven steals are new Hogwarts records. The obvious thing people will think, though, is that the Firebolt had a lot to do with it. What are your thoughts?"

"My first thought is that I'd better be careful what I say, or I'll never hear the end of it," joked Ron.

Still with her arm around Harry, Ginny laughed. "It's okay, Ron, you can tell him the truth," she shouted.

"Well, obviously it'd be stupid to say it had nothing to do with it," Ron conceded. "But the fact is that it takes a lot of skill to put that kind of good broom to good use. We knew she was going to do most of the scoring today, and we practiced with that in mind. Everyone had to get used to the speed of the new broom, and they did a great job, as you saw. I think that most people, even with that broom, wouldn't have done as well."

"I think many of us who've watched Harry over the years, Ron, were surprised to see him not get the Snitch. Were you?"

"A little, yes, but it had to happen sometime, and it was better that it happened when we had a big enough lead that it didn't matter. He's an excellent Seeker, and even excellent Seekers don't get the Snitch every time."

"When the score got to eighty-zero, you called Harry over to tell him to shadow Cho, and he clearly didn't want to do it. Why was that?"

"I don't know, Colin, I haven't had a chance to talk to him about it. There wasn't time for a debate during the game. I mean, he may have a shield for the Killing Curse, but I'm the captain, and he has to do what I tell him. But your guess was what I thought as well. If Harry has a fault, it's being too sportsmanlike. I agree with what you said: you do what you have to do to win, and that was the thing to do. Even though he didn't want to, Harry did a good job shadowing Cho."

"That was the Star of the Match, Gryffindor captain and Keeper Ron Weasley. Thank you, Ron, and congratulations on winning the Quidditch Cup."

Ron headed down to the field as Harry shook his head in wonder. When you have a good reputation, he thought, you get credit for things you don't deserve it for. Still, he had been blamed before for things that weren't justified, so he supposed it sometimes evened out.

Harry would have liked to join the championship party in Gryffindor Tower, but he and Ginny had to go to Dumbledore's office. Harry explained to Ginny where they were going, then regretfully told the team that there was something they had to do.

"Don't let him fool you, they're just going off to snog," joked Katie Bell to much laughter. Embarrassed, Harry left Gryffindor Tower, followed by Ginny. "I wonder if that's what they really think," he said as they walked toward Dumbledore's office.

"So what if they do," shrugged Ginny. "Not a bad idea, really. Kind of hard to explain to them that you need to help with security at the Burrow. By the way, why did you argue with Ron?"

Harry told her, and she shook her head. "I'm sorry. I guess it's easy to understand how that would happen."

Harry nodded. "Quite a game you had."

She shrugged. "Part of me thinks Ron was being nice, what he said to Colin. I mean, I know I'm a good Chaser, but there's no way I score that much without the Firebolt. I bet that's why Colin chose Ron instead of me, and he'd be right to. I didn't see all his saves, but he did terrific."

"He sure did," Harry agreed.

"I thought I heard you talking to Cho a couple of times," she said. "What were you talking about?"

He related the conversation to her. "Well, Dad did tell me there would be times I'd feel jealous," she mused. "She'd be glad to have you back, I'm sure. I mean, I'm sure she means what she says about being happy for you, but she must have regrets."

"I hope not," he said. "It's funny, I still don't know her that well. That conversation was probably the longest we've ever had, it just doesn't happen naturally. If I went out of my way to have a conversation with her, just to get to know her better as a friend, is that something that would make you jealous?"

She chuckled. "Harry, I might feel jealous at times if any random woman looks at you in a certain way. You shouldn't not do things when you mean well because they might make me jealous. I know, my head knows, that you would never do that to me. I think I just have to get used to it... I guess the more you have to lose, the more you worry about losing it. But really, I know I won't lose you like that. You should do what you think is best. If you feel like you want to talk to Cho, then you should talk to her."

Harry nodded, not sure what he would do. "Part of me wants to, just because she's always been nice to me, especially supporting me this year. But part of me doesn't want to because of how it might make you feel. I don't know if it's that important to me to risk upsetting you."

"Harry, I think you didn't catch one of the things I just said," she said humorously. "I said, 'You shouldn't do or not do things when you mean well because they might make me jealous.' I did mean that. My feelings are important, but they're not rational. You have to learn which ones to change your behavior because of, and which ones not to. This is one of the ones not to. I'll be sure to let you know when you should change your behavior because of my feelings."

"I have a feeling you will," he agreed. "I'm sure I have a lot to learn."

"We both do, Harry. Just remember what Tonks said was most important."

He chuckled. "I'll try. Lemon drop." The gargoyles allowed them to pass, and he knocked on the door, which opened. "Harry, Ginny, good to see you." To Harry's surprise, Ginny walked up to the standing Dumbledore and hugged him wordlessly. He hugged her back with affection. "Thank you, Ginny. But Harry may not have had a chance to relate all of our conversation. Except for missing Harry, I have no regrets about what will happen. I am content. He needs cheering up much more than I do."

She released him and stepped back to stand next to Harry, holding his hand; she had obviously decided that she didn't mind displaying her affection for him around Dumbledore. "I know, sir. I think I can do that pretty well."

Dumbledore smiled. "I believe you can," he agreed. "And Ginny, as this is the first time I have had the chance to talk to you since you became a couple, I wish to express my deep happiness that Harry has found such a person as you. I see how you love him, and I could wish nothing better for him."

Harry could see Ginny swell with pride. "Thank you, sir. That means so much to me. I'm just very lucky." She put an arm around him and squeezed for emphasis.

"You are both lucky, to have discovered your feelings for each other. Harry, have you informed Ginny of why I suggested she come?"

"No, sir, there hasn't been time." He explained it to Ginny, who responded, "I really don't care why I'm there, Harry, if I get to be with you. I know you'll have to concentrate. I'll just admire you and enjoy being around you."

Embarrassed, Harry smiled. "An excellent attitude, Ginny. Shall we go?" asked Dumbledore. They stood and left the office, heading for the fireplace in Hogsmeade.

"Sir, I have a question," said Ginny as they walked. "Harry was just telling me that when he was following her in the Quidditch match, Cho teased him about people knowing which couples' place we like to go to. I have to imagine the teachers know all about that, right?"

He smiled. "Certainly, Ginny. After all, many of them used them when they were students themselves. I gather the thrust of your question is, why are they allowed?" Ginny nodded. "Of course, they are not allowed officially, but they are not disallowed either. We could say that their existence, and the school's tolerance of them, is a recognition of human nature. Young people will have these urges well before they graduate from Hogwarts, and they are powerful urges. The complete and effective banning of any intimate personal contact among the students would simply lead many to riskier pursuits in the desire to be alone, such as attempting to leave the Hogwarts grounds, or finding empty classrooms into which anyone could walk at any time. It is understood that the couples' places help to eliminate that sort of risk.

"I should say, however, that I for one do not disapprove of such encounters. They are a fact of life, and one of the more pleasant ones. Some people feel that students are too young for that, but I feel that in this area, given proper information, young people are ready to do more than what most adults would wish them to do. Unfortunately, any open recognition of this by the Hogwarts staff would bring considerable criticism from parents, so we keep things the way they are."

"It wouldn't bring criticism from my parents, I know that," said Ginny, as they walked out of the castle entrance, drawing surprised looks from nearby students.

"Yes, Harry told the staff what your mother said, and Minerva mentioned it to me. Of course, I agree with her attitude. Minerva also told me, Harry, about how you responded to her comment about the couples' places; it was very amusing."

Dumbledore explained to Ginny what had happened, which gave Ginny a good laugh. "Why didn't you tell me about that?" Ginny asked Harry reprovingly. "That was hilarious!"

Harry shrugged. "I guess I just don't think to repeat things from the staff room," he said. "I feel like... they're used to the idea that they're talking to other teachers, and the students aren't going to know what they say. My situation is unique, since I'm both a student and a teacher, and if they thought I was going to go around telling students what happened in there, they wouldn't be comfortable with me. It's important to me that they are."

"I understand," Ginny said, "but now it's different with you and I. I'm your... I was going to say girlfriend, but somehow it doesn't feel like a strong enough word with us. It sounds too casual, and we feel more than that. I like Hermione's phrase, 'special person.' Anyway, I'm your special person, and you can tell me things you wouldn't tell anyone else, and I won't repeat them. You should know that."

"I do know that," Harry agreed. "I guess I just hadn't thought about the staff room thing like that."

"Ginny is right, of course, Harry," commented Dumbledore. "One of the many great pleasures of having a 'special person' is the sharing of confidences which we would share with no one else. I do not think the staff would be bothered at the notion of your telling Ginny things, in this context."

"Yes, sir, but they might not understand our situation. We're still so young, and people our age sometimes go through lots of boyfriends or girlfriends. We want to be together for the rest of our lives, but they may not know that."

Dumbledore smiled. "People see how you and Ginny are, Harry. I think they understand that better than you might think they do." They walked through the castle gates and into Hogsmeade.

"Sir, there's something I wondered about," began Ginny. "I've told that to other fifth years, and they don't contradict me, but some of them have this look, like I don't know what I'm talking about. One of them said, 'You're only a fifth year, how can you know who you want to marry?' I know, and I'm sure I know, and Harry says he does too, but--"

"Does," not 'says he does,'" corrected Harry.

She gave him a quick smile in acknowledgment. "I guess it's easier to accept it from me than from you. But anyway, do you think that there is any chance that we're fooling ourselves, that we really believe this but there's just no way we can know?"

"Love is quite a mystery, in a way," said Dumbledore. "It is a powerful force, as Harry has been demonstrating, but we cannot really 'know' anything about it except by personal experience; there is nothing objective about it. So, the answer to your

question must necessarily be stated as an opinion, of which there are many different ones. Mine is that no one should conclude that anyone else is fooling themselves in this regard. It could be true, but no one else can even make an informed guess without knowing the participants intimately.

"My feeling is that love is like faith; if you feel it strongly, then you have it, and you do not require proof or explanation. I do not need to use my talents as a Legilimens to know that yours is extremely strong, on both parts. All you need to succeed is to be determined that it will endure, no matter what difficulties you face, and to be willing to face those difficulties and work through them. When Voldemort first invaded Harry's dreams back in September, Harry faced the trial partly because the alternative-surrender-was unacceptable. Every long-term relationship has trials; some will seem overwhelming. But if both parties' love does not waver-or, to put it another way, if the idea of separating is seen as unacceptable-then both parties will be willing to make whatever efforts are necessary to overcome them. These efforts can be daunting. But the power of love will always defeat them in the end, if both partners feel it powerfully enough. So to finally answer your question, you could be seen as fooling yourselves if you believed that your relationship would always be easy, and free of trouble. But to be determined that your love will last a lifetime, and be willing to do what it takes to make sure it does, I believe that is something you can know now."

Harry and Ginny were silent for a moment. Harry reflected that this was one of the reasons he wanted to spend more time with Dumbledore while Dumbledore was still around. "Did you have... difficulties in your marriage, sir?"

"Certainly, Harry. No two people, however much in love, are perfectly suited to each other in every respect. Difficulties will inevitably arise. They are part of the challenges of life. If we never had challenges, we would never truly know who we are, what we are capable of. But though the difficulties were serious at the time, they never truly threatened the bond we had. We had faith in our love, and were ready to do what was necessary to protect it, as I am sure you two will as well."

"Sir, other than having faith and being willing to do whatever is necessary, what do you think is the most important thing for a relationship to succeed?" asked Ginny.

Dumbledore looked thoughtful. "There are almost as many answers to that question, Ginny, as there are relationships. But one answer that is common to most relationships is that it is important to empathize, to understand how the other person thinks and sees things. If one applies one's own standards and attitudes in trying to understand another's actions or attitudes, one will not truly understand the other. So, for example, Harry, if Ginny has suffered a trying and emotionally

difficult experience and needs your help and support, it is not enough for you to simply know what the event was; you must also know how she sees it, how her beliefs, attitudes, and experiences factor into her experience of the event. If you try to understand how she feels by asking yourself the question, 'how would I feel if this happened to me,' you may, depending on the circumstances, be unable to effectively advise, console, and support her. We all must feel that we are understood and appreciated, most especially by those we love."

"I feel like I should be writing this down," said Harry, only half-joking.

Dumbledore chuckled. "You may not remember everything I have said in one hour, Harry, but you will remember in your heart, especially when the time comes to apply it. Your heart will want to do what will support and help her, and she will for you. You will simply need experience to learn how to do it, and that will come with time. You need not dwell on it now, though it is helpful to think generally about such matters."

"It sounds like we have an adventure ahead of us, sir," Ginny said, as they approached the Owl Office, which contained the fireplace they would be using.

"Yes, Ginny, but I do not wish to intimidate you," Dumbledore said. "It is a wonderful adventure, with far more joy than sorrow. You have experienced the wonder of it already, and will continue to do so. That is why I am so happy for both of you." Harry and Ginny shared a smile as they walked into the Owl Office.

Molly and Arthur were waiting in the living room as Harry, then Ginny, then Dumbledore stepped out of the fireplace. Molly hugged Harry and kissed him on the cheek, as he did her. "It's so wonderful to have you two here, even if it's just for the afternoon," she said enthusiastically as she hugged and kissed Ginny.

As Harry shook Arthur's hand, he said, "I really want to thank both of you for having me for the summer, and Pansy, even though it means making some changes here. This is your home, it shouldn't have to be some high-security fortress."

Molly shrugged. "Voldemort is after one of our loved ones," she said, "and we want to do whatever we can to keep you safe. This is your home too, Harry, and we're not going to ask you to stay someplace else. We want you here, and now that's doubly true, because of you and Ginny. You just have to be together over the summer."

"That's what we think too, Mum," said Ginny happily. "I'm so glad we'll get to be able to."

"If you would excuse us, I would like to have a word with Arthur and Molly," said Dumbledore, and they went into the kitchen. As soon as they were out of sight, Harry and Ginny fell into a kiss. "Oh, I can't wait for summer," Ginny enthused after they broke apart. "To have you around all the time... I know you'll be doing a lot of

Auror training, but you'll still be here a lot. Mum sometimes goes out shopping, you know... we'll be able to be in my room, all alone." Her eyes provided more commentary on what she had in mind.

Harry smiled, appreciating her enthusiasm. "That sounds really good," he agreed. "But Ron'll be in the house, and so will Pansy."

"They can be alone in Ron's room," Ginny said reasonably. "They won't disturb us, we won't disturb them."

"They're not even a couple yet!" Harry pointed out, surprised that Ginny sounded so sure.

"They will be," she said with certainty. "It's bound to happen. Probably before the summer, but definitely during the summer."

"I hope you're right," he said, then kissed her, because they were alone and he could.

"I am," she said. "They won't announce it, of course; it won't be like how you told me. Oh, Harry, I'm so glad you did that..." She snuggled against him, then continued, "We'll probably find out by looking at a map and seeing them in one of the couples' places."

"Or Hermione will figure it out by piecing together little bits of information, and tell us," Harry suggested.

Ginny shook her head. "Hermione's more discreet than that. She may find out that way, but she won't tell us. She'll wait for them to do it."

"That's true, hadn't thought of that," Harry conceded. "That would be funny, us four in the house, two couples. I guess they'd know not to walk in on us if your door was closed."

"Well, they'd only do it once, that's for sure," she said casually, before breaking out into a grin at his startled expression. "Just kidding, of course they wouldn't. You're so easy to tease. One of the many things I love about you."

"I'm glad, I guess," he said, eyeing her warily but lovingly. He leaned over and kissed her again. Just as they finished, Harry heard a voice.

"I'm sorry, Harry, Ginny," said Dumbledore, his tone suggesting he was truly sorry to have interrupted them, "but we would like you to join us in the kitchen, if you would." They got up, followed him into the kitchen, and sat down at the table, as did Dumbledore.

"We were just discussing some of the practicalities of making the modifications to the house," Dumbledore said, "and how it would be done. Normally in a case such as this, a request would be made of the Ministry to provide the necessary materials and funds. The cause is certainly legitimate; they would not turn it down. But, in the classic fashion of bureaucracies, it could be delayed, debated over, and so

forth, and the process could last beyond June, which would be an unacceptable delay. So we must consider that we are on our own in this regard."

Harry hadn't considered the fact that it would cost money to do this. "Well, obviously, my money should be used to pay for it. Do I have enough to pay for whatever has to be done?"

"Yes, of course, Harry, the cost will not exceed a thousand Galleons. There is far more than that in your vault, that is no problem."

"How much is in your vault, anyway?" asked Ginny.

"I have no idea," Harry admitted. "It's a lot, is all I know."

"I took the liberty of having the Gringotts goblins count it shortly before you came to Hogwarts six years ago," said Dumbledore. "At that time, the balance was forty-two thousand, eight hundred seventy-seven Galleons." Harry saw the Weasleys' eyebrows rise.

Harry looked blank, then said, "I'm sorry, but I guess the number doesn't mean that much to me... I don't know what it represents, it's just a number."

"If this helps, at current exchange rates based on the price of gold in world markets, it is approximately two hundred and thirty thousand pounds. Exchange rates are deceptive, because wizards tend to need less currency than Muggles, but it should give you an idea. It may also help to consider it as equal to ten years of your current salary, or more than twice what is necessary to purchase a comfortable house."

"So it's way more than I need," said Harry, "especially since I'm getting a salary now. You're not going to object to this, are you?" Harry asked Arthur and Molly, concerned. "Because it's just because of me that it's necessary, after all."

"That has nothing to do with it, Harry," said Molly. "But the fact is that we couldn't afford it anyway, so we accept that your money has to be used. We wanted to talk to you about that, to make sure you had no problems with it, though we knew you wouldn't. But some work is going to have to be done on the house, and I was thinking, as long as that was being done, there were some other things that have nothing to do with security that would be nice to do at the same time. My answer to the Bill question you asked before was that we wouldn't accept gold from you unless we had a particular purpose in mind. Now we do, so--"

Harry was nodding happily. "Really, you should buy or do anything you want."

Ginny smiled, finding Harry's attitude amusing. "What were you thinking of?"

"For example, I'd like to have the stairs taken out and rebuilt, they're not as sturdy as I'd like them to be. Also, the roof needs work, and Arthur would be very keen on having electricity installed. And this kitchen table is very old, I read about

this new one that cleans the plates after you finish eating and puts them away by itself..."

"The more you say, Mum, the happier he gets," said Ginny.

Harry nodded. "I'd be really happy for you to do that, you know that."

Molly smiled, embarrassed. "We know that, Harry, we wouldn't even suggest it if we weren't so sure of how you felt about this. You have to understand, even though we know it makes you happy, it's still a bit difficult to ask. It's only because we love you so much that we'll do it."

"I'm really glad, Molly," Harry said earnestly. "Both that you love me, and that you'll do it. I especially like the idea of the table, it'll save you lots of effort."

"Thank you, Harry," she said. "I thought I would go get a few things today, and place a few orders, while you and Professor Dumbledore work on the anti-Disapparation plotting."

"Shouldn't we go to Gringotts first, then? Oh, wait, you can get gold out of my vault anyway, you've done it before."

"No, I can't now," said Molly. "When you were underage, Professor Dumbledore had a trusteeship of your account, and it was with his permission that I could access it. Now, even though you're not yet seventeen, you're still of age, so only you can access your vault. But you can give me permission to do so, I have one of the forms from Gringotts here." She took it out and handed it to him. "You just have to sign here and tap your wand over the signature."

He did so, and handed it back to her. "I'm really sorry about all the problems this will cause--"

Molly waved him off. "Harry, really. Having you with us for the summer is compensation enough. It's very sweet of you to worry, though. Now, I should be off, and you can get on with the plotting." She kissed him on the cheek, then Ginny, then left the room.

"Let us get started, then," said Dumbledore, getting up from the table and heading for the front door. Arthur followed, saying, "I'd like to watch for a while, I've never seen this done before." Harry and Ginny followed behind him.

They walked outside to see Fawkes flying around the yard, coming to rest on Dumbledore's shoulder. Harry felt a wave of sadness as he recalled the reason that Fawkes was spending more time than usual in Dumbledore's presence. Already holding hands with Ginny, he gripped hers more tightly and looked at her. Reading his expression, she touched his cheek in sympathy and whispered, "Be happy when you get to be with him, Harry, like now."

Harry felt comforted as much by her presence as by her words. They caught up to Dumbledore and Arthur at a spot outside the boundaries of the Weasley

property. "We will do a smaller plot first, just for practice and to make sure it works properly. Use the same spell you would for an anti-Disapparation field, but mentally focus it towards a spot on the ground; imagine a beam of energy emanating from your wand. You should move it across the ground at a rate of no more than three inches every second. First, please make a circle with a one-yard diameter."

Harry did so, though the circle wasn't very neat. It seemed strange to see energy coming from his wand like that. After he finished, Dumbledore stepped into the center of the circle. After a few seconds, he said, "Excellent, Harry, I cannot Disapparate. Now I will show you the area to be included in the plotting."

After he did, Harry got started; Dumbledore suggested that he rest every other minute, as he had to concentrate to keep up the energy beam. He wanted to keep his arm around Ginny while he did it, but he had to keep moving while using the beam, and it was hard for them to move in tandem while not disturbing Harry's aim or concentration, so they just held hands instead. Arthur went in fifteen minutes after they got started; Harry told Ginny she could go in too if she wanted, and was rewarded with a 'don't be stupid' look.

It took three hours; Harry felt tired from the mental exertion, but satisfied. If he was really stronger than Dumbledore, this was a way to put his talent to good use. After he finished, they stepped outside the circle, and Dumbledore asked Harry to Apparate into the Weasleys' living room. He tried, but nothing happened. "That is good, Harry, I cannot either. It is successful."

They headed back to the house. "Sir," Ginny asked, "wouldn't it be better if Harry could Apparate in and out, so he could get away if there was an attack?"

Dumbledore glanced at Ginny, amused. "There is an obvious flaw in the assumption underlying your question, Ginny."

She thought for a moment, then grimaced in annoyance. "Oh, of course, if the house was attacked, Harry wouldn't go anywhere, he'd stay and fight."

Harry was glad she understood that and didn't protest. "What do you think are the chances there'll be an attack, sir?"

"I would be amazed if there was one," said Dumbledore. "What you have just done is only one of many security measures that will be in place by the time summer begins. There will be alarms, Dark magic detectors, and other protections in place. Aurors will at all times be ready to take a fireplace here at a moment's notice. An attack would be a major risk for the Death Eaters, doubly so considering that their intended target is now stronger than they are."

Ginny squeezed Harry's hand proudly as they walked up the front steps and into the house. It's all because of you, he thought, as he met her eyes.

Upon returning to Hogwarts, Ginny asked Harry if they could go to his office so they could talk privately before they returned to Gryffindor Tower. They entered Harry's office, and Harry locked both the door leading to the hall and the one leading to the classroom. He smiled at her and said, "So, was it really talking that you wanted to do?"

He noticed that she seemed a little nervous, but now she smiled. "Actually, yes, but now that you mention that..." They embraced and had a long kiss, then sat back down. "That's always so good," he said. "What did you need to talk to me about?" Now clearly nervous, she took a deep breath. Harry was immediately concerned; what could she be so nervous about?

"I had... an emotional reaction to something that happened recently," she began haltingly. "When I tell you what it was, you might be upset, you might think it wasn't fair of me to feel that way. But I think I need to tell you what happened. Last night, when you suddenly left Gryffindor Tower, I had no idea where you had gone, so when you didn't come back soon, I went to look at my map. You were in Dumbledore's quarters, and Hermione was with you. When I first looked at the map, your dot and Hermione's were almost on top of each other, which I knew meant that you were in close contact, like hugging. My first reaction... I was jealous, Harry. I couldn't imagine what was going on, why you and she were there. Then soon after that, you three were on what I assumed was a sofa, and your dots were on top of each other again, for a long time. I knew nothing like that was going on, because he was there, too, but I was going crazy wondering what was going on. I did nothing but look at that map for, like, an hour and a half. Then your dots and hers were in the middle of the room, where you obviously slept, and he went back into his room."

Harry had said nothing while she was talking, but was having very strong emotional reactions. When she stopped talking for a moment, he thought she was going to continue, but he couldn't stop himself. "I can't believe you thought that!" he exclaimed. "I thought you understood how it was with me and Hermione! But even if it wasn't her, how could you even think... do you really think I would do that to you?" He felt outraged, bewildered, and upset. "I thought you knew me better than that."

She looked desperately sad. "I do, Harry, I do, you have to believe that. I'm not saying it was right, and I'm ashamed I felt that way. Really, I knew, like, my mind knew, that it was nothing, that there was some good reason. But it was like something was grabbing at me, saying 'you're going to lose him, you can't keep him, he's too good for you.' I tried to ignore it, to push it away, but I couldn't get rid of it. I didn't want to feel that way." Her misery was clear in her eyes, but Harry was still too upset to sympathize.

"Ginny, you know you're not going to lose me! I've said it so many times..." Harry felt as though he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "How could you think that?" he repeated. "He's going to die! He's so important to me, and I just found out he's going to die! How could you-"

"I didn't know that!" she shouted, tears in her eyes. "I was back in my dormitory, looking at a map! I had no idea what had happened!" She tried to collect herself and stop crying. He took out his wand and swished it at the doors to soundproof the room.

She stopped crying and started talking again, a pleading look in her eyes. "Harry, you have to put yourself in my position. I didn't know what had happened, I had no information except what I was seeing on the map. Maybe if that was you, you'd be all logical, reasoning out what might have happened. I wanted to be that way, I really tried. But I just couldn't. I didn't think you would do that, Harry. I didn't think Hermione would, and certainly not in Dumbledore's quarters. But I had no idea, and my worst fears just came to the front of my mind, and stayed there."

She looked at him, willing him to understand. "You don't know, Harry," she said, anguished. "I don't know if you can understand it. Haven't you ever had a fear, an irrational fear, that you just couldn't get out of your mind? Every day, I fear I'm going to lose you. Sometimes I fear I'll lose you to Voldemort, but sometimes, I just think I'm not good enough for you. When I'm with you, it's not so bad, I see how you look at me, and I feel better. But when I'm alone, I think all these things. You're Harry Potter, you could do so much better, there are so many better women out there, who would love to have you. And I'm just so ordinary. What if, some day..." Unable to finish her sentence, Ginny dissolved into tears, her head in her hands.

Sympathy finally overtook Harry's anger and disbelief. He moved his chair over next to hers, and gently pulled her head onto his shoulder, where she continued to cry. "Ginny, you're the one I want," he said, holding her. "And you're far from ordinary. You're pretty, you're smart, you're funny, you're interesting..."

"But there's a lot of women out there who are even more of those things," she said through tears. "Look at Tonks, she's everything you said, and she's an Auror. She may have acted like she was kidding, because she didn't want to get her hopes up, but she'd have had you in a second if you'd looked at her like you were serious."

"But I didn't," he pointed out, trying to be sympathetic. "I wasn't trying not to, I just was afraid to fall in love. But I did, anyway, with you." He gripped her shoulders. "Whatever it is that makes you you, that's what I fell in love with. There may be lots of other girls, but there's only one you. And you're who I love, and I always will."

They stood and hugged each other fiercely, clinging to each other. "I'm sorry," she said. "I know how you feel, I really do. It's not like you don't tell me enough. I know that you'd never leave me. But I worry anyway, Harry. I can't help it, I wish I could. Please don't be mad at me for it. You would never do anything bad to me, and I'm not trying to say I think you would. But it's hard for me. I... just have to get used to it, I guess. Funny... like Dad said, I have the most desirable man in the wizarding world, I just didn't realize that there would be a drawback too, or that it would be this. I tried not to get my hopes up, just like Tonks did. I told myself I could never have you, that you were way too good. Now I have you, but some part of me is still saying that."

It was slowly dawning on Harry that this was very close to what Tonks and Cassandra had been saying yesterday. He realized that this was not so much jealousy as insecurity. I was supposed to not be annoyed when this happened, he thought, looks like I messed that up. "You are good, Ginny, you're really, really good. I'm sorry I didn't understand it right when you told me about it. I just thought you were saying that I'm such a bad person that I would do that to you. I should have known better."

"How would you know? You don't see yourself like other people see you, Harry, you don't really understand how desirable you are. How could you realize that I would feel this way?" She looked up at him and touched his face. "I was scared to tell you this. I really didn't want to, I knew how it would sound. I almost didn't. But I talked to Mum, and she said I should, because you needed to understand how I felt when it was something that made me feel like I did. I was so miserable last night, and then this morning, when you told us about Dumbledore, I was so ashamed. I still am."

"You didn't know," he said comfortingly.

"You need to know what you're getting, Harry. I hope I'll change, I hope I stop feeling like I'm not worthy of you. Part of me knows it's not a question of whether I'm worthy or not, you just love me, and that's all I need. But something like this could happen again, and I don't want to suffer like I did last night. I hope it doesn't."

Harry's heart went out to her. He knew what it felt like to feel unworthy, and it was terrible; he had never imagined anyone would feel it when comparing themselves to him. "I'll do my best, Ginny. I'll try to understand, I'll try to help you. I don't think I'm very good at this sort of thing, there's so much I don't understand. But I'll try really hard, because I hate to see you like this. I love you so much..."

"I love you too," she said, holding him again. "Now I'm starting to worry that if I do this too much, you'll get fed up, and..."

Harry choked down impatience. However many times I have to tell her, I will, he thought. "That can never happen. You shouldn't worry, because nothing you can do would make me want to leave you, including worrying that I'd leave you."

She chuckled at how that sounded. "I wonder if all girls are like this, or if it's just me," she said, finally starting to feel better, Harry could tell. "Of course, most girls don't have you as their special person. I'm so lucky, I should just appreciate it instead of worrying. I want to. Like I said, I do when I'm with you." Harry didn't know what he could say that he hadn't said already, so he just kept holding her, moving his hand over her hair, trying to reassure her.

She looked at him with gratitude. Her expression very serious, she said, "You know, I hope, that the reaction I had has nothing to do with how bad I feel for you about Dumbledore. It's not like, too bad about him, but I have my own problems. I just didn't know, and by the time I did, I had already gone through a lot. But you know I feel terrible for you, and I'll do everything I can to support you."

"I know," he said. "It was just bad timing, bad circumstances. And I should have talked to you before running off to his quarters."

"You were in grief, Harry, you couldn't be expected to think of that kind of thing."

"But you're the one I should go to when I'm in grief. Probably the damn privacy thing has a lot to do with it. I love Hogwarts, but sometimes I think I'll be glad for us to graduate just so we can be alone whenever we want."

"That will be nice," she agreed, looking wistful. After a pause, she asked, "Why do you think Hermione didn't tell me, though? She figured it out. She could've sent me down there, or at least taken me with her."

Harry was a little surprised at Ginny's tone; he wondered whether Ginny blamed Hermione for not having done so. "I don't know," he said. "I guess she just didn't think of it either. I guess I can't blame her for not thinking of it, since I didn't think of it."

Ginny didn't react, and was silent for a minute again. "It's funny, the things you think about when you're in the state I was last night. Well, not funny funny, but you know what I mean. I was thinking about you and Hermione... let me ask you, did you ever think that you might end up with her? Not even seriously thinking about it, just, random thoughts?"

Harry knew that even if the answer to the question was 'yes,' he shouldn't say that; he wasn't sure, but he assumed that Ginny was asking for reassurance. "I guess I wouldn't say I never thought of it, but hardly at all," he answered. "I mean, I never had a sister, so I don't know what it's like, but she always felt more like a sister." He paused, then added, "Like an older sister, even though we're the same age."

She smiled a little. "You mean, because she's always telling you what to do."

"Not only me, of course, but yes," he agreed. "I don't mean anything nasty to her by that-you know I really love her, as a friend-but someone being bossy and telling you what to do isn't the kind of thing that makes you think about wanting to spend your life with that person, or feel romantic about them."

"Good thing I don't do that," said Ginny humorously. More seriously, she added, "I can definitely see that. I've talked to Neville a few times, and I think they're going to have problems with that, at some point."

Harry's eyebrows went up. "He said that?"

"No, he didn't. This is just what I think. I probably talk with him more than the others in the group, except you," she explained. "A lot of times, as far as our group goes, it's just the two of us in the common room. You're teaching or in the staff room, Hermione's always in the library, and Ron's sometimes planning Quidditch stuff, or flying. Sometimes I ask him how it's going with Hermione, and he talks about it. He's told me about a few problems they've had, and sometimes I have to bite my tongue not to butt in. He just doesn't stand up for himself enough, he's too quick to assume things are his fault. In that relationship, she's the boss. Not that she's overbearing, or bad-she's just being herself. But he needs to assert himself more. I don't want to interfere, because I'm Hermione's friend, too, and I don't want to be taking sides. I have tried to gently suggest that he be more active in letting her know how he feels, but I can tell he's just not comfortable doing that. So, I worry that there might be problems. I hope not, though."

Harry didn't know what to say, as this was very far from his area of expertise. "I hope not, too. I hadn't thought of it that way, but it's funny that they ended up together, considering the way they are, like that."

She nodded. "Well, he's changed a lot over the past year. Maybe he'll keep changing. We'll see." After a pause, she said, "We should get back to the common room, they're probably still celebrating. But while we're here... well, remember what Katie said earlier." He smiled, and they fell into a kiss.

Upon returning to Gryffindor Tower, Harry and Ginny did their best to enjoy the victory celebration. There was a spirited discussion about the importance of equipment in Quidditch after Colin, under pressure from Ron and Katie, admitted that a deciding factor in his choice of Ron as Star of the Match had been the fact that Ginny had used a Firebolt, whereas Ron had no special equipment.

After dinner, Harry sat with Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville to do homework. This was his first chance all weekend, and he did his best, though it was still difficult for him not to think about Dumbledore too much. At least, he thought

gratefully, he didn't have nearly as much homework as the others. They had eight classes to his five, except Hermione with ten, and two of his classes-Defense Against the Dark Arts and Care of Magical Creatures-had very little homework.

In bed later, he tried to read more of *Reborn From the Ashes*, but again found it hard to concentrate. Fawkes sang to him, and it occurred to him that his dormitory-mates got this benefit when he was in a bad state of mind; both Dean and Seamus had mentioned to him that they always enjoyed it when Fawkes sang, and Harry knew that the other four had an understanding that if Fawkes was singing, they would make sure the others knew so they could come to the dormitory and listen if they wanted.

He practiced Occlumency at the usual time, and with Fawkes' help, finally fell asleep an hour later than usual. When he woke up the next morning, he remembered that Dumbledore had been in one of his dreams, but he couldn't remember the situation. He figured it wasn't too surprising, considering what had happened over the weekend. As he got ready for the day, he wondered how he could spend more time with Dumbledore. Five weeks didn't seem like very much time.

Chapter 22

The Joining of Hands

As May ended and June began, Harry felt as though it was his most fulfilling yet trying time ever at Hogwarts. He was happily in love, and all other aspects of his life were positive except one. Dumbledore's impending death hung over him like a shadow much of the time; he felt free of it mainly when in the presence of Ginny, Fawkes, or Dumbledore himself.

To Harry's great pleasure, Dumbledore had suggested that Harry and Ginny join him for a regular dinner on Sunday nights. They had to be discreet, however, as while Harry having dinner with Dumbledore was fine since he was a teacher, it could not get around the school that Ginny was as well, since having dinner with the headmaster could be considered special treatment. Harry's other four friends knew, of course, and were happy for them that they got to do it.

He had not told Ginny of the latest prophecy, or of the confrontation-Harry assumed it would be one, anyway-that would happen in early summer. He knew she would worry uselessly, and he didn't even know for sure that he would be involved. He assumed he would be, but the prophecy had not said it specifically, just that he would 'later' have the opportunity to defeat Voldemort. Hermione's plea that he not sacrifice himself for her suggested he would be there as well, but he didn't think she

knew much more that he did, so she may have been guessing, he felt. He wondered how much, if anything, she had shared with Neville

After Auror training on the second Saturday of June, Harry met Ginny and they went to Harry's office. Harry had scheduled a fireplace call with Archibald Dentus, and while Ginny would not participate in the talk, as Harry's head would be in the fireplace, she wanted to be with him and hold his hand while he talked. "I want to be with all of you, but I'll take what parts of you I can get," she joked.

Harry found that Dentus was in his living room waiting for him. "Hello, Harry, good to see you. How have you been doing? Very busy, as usual?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so," he answered. "Sometimes it seems like if I could stay awake all twenty-four hours it might be enough, but as it is..."

"I understand, you have quite a few burdens, and one responsibility which is very pleasant, but requires time and attention as well. Speaking of which, how are things with you and Ginny?"

"Really good, thanks," Harry said. "I still get the feeling sometimes when people look at us that they think we're overdoing it, or can't really be this committed to each other this young. But I try not to let it bother me."

"Good idea, Harry," Dentus agreed. "Only you can really know what's going on. I've always been especially close to my wife; in fact, I welcomed quitting my Ministry job two years ago because it meant I was able to spend more time with her."

"I was wondering, Archibald, now that the Ministry's gotten onto the right track about Voldemort, did you consider rejoining?"

Dentus chuckled. "It isn't the kind of thing that you can just leave and rejoin," he explained. "I had a position of a certain level of authority and influence, and when I left, someone else took that position. Such positions are highly coveted within the Ministry, and for me to get it back would mean someone would have to vacate it, which is highly unlikely. But it's all right, I'm content as I am. Interestingly, I have almost as much influence as I did before I left, partly because I'm respected and listened to by high-level Ministry people, and partly because of the circumstances under which I left."

"You mean, because you turned out to be right," Harry said.

"Exactly. That counts for a lot in politics. Well, there's really only one thing I can tell you that would interest you: some people at the Ministry are talking about the idea of suspending the issuing of new Apparation licenses until the ARA has expired. Their public argument is that we don't need to be giving licenses to people who aren't going to be allowed to Apparate anyway, and that as they're young, they'll just be tempted to Apparate in violation of the ARA."

"But they might need to for emergencies," Harry said.

Dentus half-shrugged. "The problem with that argument is that the most likely emergency need for it would be a Death Eater attack, and they always put down anti-Disapparation fields before they attack, so it's not going to do them any good anyway. And really, that's true. The other most likely genuine emergency would be a serious health problem, but that's very uncommon among seventeen-year-olds, and most people in serious condition don't have enough strength to Disapparate anyway."

"I really don't like this," said Harry. "But you knew that, that's why you told me."

"I suspected you wouldn't be happy," Dentus agreed. "But I'd be curious to know your reasons."

Harry thought for a few seconds; as he did, he gripped Ginny's hand, and felt her grip his in return. It was easy to forget sometimes when you talked through a fireplace that you weren't really where the other person was. "I can't think of a... logical argument against it, not yet, but I think that continuing to issue the licenses would be a way of saying, 'this is only temporary, we'll stop this as soon as we can,' but stopping giving them seems like a step towards making the situation more permanent. I know people would claim it wasn't, but it just seems that way."

Dentus nodded. "You may not know much about politics, but you have good intuition. Yes, that's my problem with it as well. I don't have a 'logical' argument against it either, but I don't like the direction it points in. The problem is, it's hard to gather opposition to a proposed regulation that you simply don't like the smell of; you have to have better reasons than that. They can also say that it improves the Ministry's manpower situation; with fewer people giving unnecessary licenses, there would be more people who can do things to fight against Voldemort. The problem is, the reality is that it won't happen that way; the extra manpower will probably get taken by whichever part of the Ministry has the most influence at the time. But again, you can't make an argument based on things you know but others can easily deny, even though they know it's true as well."

Harry smiled to make clear that what he was about to say wasn't directed at Dentus personally. "You know, sometimes it's depressing to talk to you about this, Archibald. All I do is learn things about human nature that I'd rather not know."

Dentus chuckled. "Maybe we should talk about women, then, or some other more pleasant topic. I do know what you mean, Harry. I remember what I said the first time we met, that I felt like I had told you there was no Santa Claus. I'm helping you get rid of your innocence, at least one facet of it, and innocence is sweet. I mean, I thought it was cute, how innocent you were. But for you, right now, innocence could be dangerous, so there we are. But don't be too discouraged. In some

ways, politics is the arena in which we see people at their worst, which means that in general, they aren't that bad, and many are very good."

"Why is it that people are at their worst in politics?" Harry wondered. "Is it that hard to find good people to be in politics? I mean, you were."

"Thank you for the compliment, Harry. But note the word 'were.' The kind of reasons I left for are exactly why many good people don't get involved with it in the first place. They see too many things happen that disgust them, and they can't do too much about it. Also, politicians are rewarded for behaving selfishly. They get to stay in office if they do what's popular, as opposed to what's right. It's up to the people to decide what's popular, so politicians are only as effective as the people are in deciding what's popular."

"Also, in the Ministry itself- excuse me just a minute, Harry." Dentus turned in his chair, looked at his hand, and spoke quietly for a few seconds. He turned back to Harry. "Sorry. I was saying, within the Ministry itself, people are rewarded for careerism, for going along with the leadership whether they think it's right or not. Not to speak ill of the dead, but Percy Weasley was an excellent example of this. Contrarily, Arthur Weasley, a good man who would do the right thing, is content to stay in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office because he has no interest in the infighting and moral compromises necessary to achieve a position of influence. Anyway, careerism tends to get everyone pulling the same way even if it's the wrong way, as we saw last year. I could go on, but I've probably depressed you enough for one day."

As Dentus talked, Harry felt Ginny let go of his hand, then hold his wrist in one hand while gently caressing his hand with her other one, occasionally stopping to kiss the back of his hand. He almost smiled, but managed not to, and tried to focus harder on what Dentus was saying while enjoying what Ginny was doing. He wondered if she was having some fun with him, deliberately trying to distract him.

"Well, I guess it's better that I know this kind of thing," Harry said reluctantly. "About the licenses, do you think I should say something publicly about it?"

Dentus shook his head slightly. "I'd say, only if you feel especially strongly about it. The problem is, the more you speak, the less an impact you'll have every time you do. Getting the ARA through was a good time to do that; we've seen it's helped save lives, and it might not have happened without you. You want to save speaking publicly for issues that are very important. This one is annoying, but not that important, and hard to fight against. Also, it might look like you're mainly thinking of your Hogwarts friends."

Harry wanted to say something publicly, but he recognized that Dentus was right. "Okay, that makes sense," he agreed. "Excuse me, but... were you speaking into your hand just then?"

"Yes, Harry, to my wife. Why?"

"How does that work? I've never seen anyone speak into their hand before."

Dentus looked surprised. "Sometimes I forget you didn't grow up in the wizarding world, and I guess there aren't that many married Hogwarts professors anyway. It's a way for married couples to stay in close touch with each other, though not many people have it done anymore. It was done a lot more a few hundred years ago. When it's done, it's part of the marriage ceremony, and it's called the Joining of Hands. Someone-very few wizards or witches know how to do this anymore-casts a complicated spell over the couple, and the result of it is that they can communicate with each other anytime, as you just saw me do. By willing it to happen, I can see my wife's face in my hand, and I can talk to her, at whatever distance."

Harry was surprised he had never heard of this; obviously, the Weasleys didn't have this. "That sounds really convenient. Why isn't it done much anymore?"

Dentus looked at Harry with a shrewd expression. "I see I've piqued your interest. It's not done much because it more or less went out of style, and there are potential problems. First of all, it's irreversible; if you ever separate from that person, they're still in your palm if you choose, and you're in theirs if they choose. A lot of popular fiction has been written where people get this done and end up breaking up tragically, and then the Joining haunts them for the rest of their lives, their former partner obsessively checks on them, and so forth. There were also a few real-life situations where the Joining ended badly for prominent people, so it was a combination of things that caused it to lose popularity. Also, this can't be confirmed, but some people who had it done whose partners died said that their hands ached for the rest of their lives. Maybe it's just a legend, I don't know. I suppose my wife or I will find out someday." The look on Dentus's face suggested to Harry that Dentus hoped that he and his wife would die at the same time.

"Why did you have it done, if it's not that common?"

"I guess we were both romantic types, and we were very much in love. Still are, of course, though that's always different when you get older. I think it's considered a grand romantic gesture, maybe even a bit overblown to some people. A lot of people think it's not necessary, that they can always be together by Apparating, so there's no point in being able to communicate this way. My wife and I just liked the way it made us feel connected. I see from your expression that it's something that interests you."

Harry nodded. "It sounds great," he said enthusiastically. "Is it something that Professor Dumbledore can do?"

Dentus chuckled. "Yes, he can. I think a lot of people go to him when they want it done; it's best to have it done by as strong a wizard as possible. But it's done when people get married, and you won't be able to do that for some time." He paused, thinking, then said, "Harry, has Professor Dumbledore talked to you recently about his... future plans?"

Harry's expression changed instantly to one of sadness, and he nodded. "I assume you mean, because of Fawkes choosing me..."

Dentus nodded somberly. "I wanted to be careful, because I didn't know what he had told you. I'm sorry, I know this must be hard for you, because of how close you are to him. I mentioned it because I wanted to know if you understood that he wouldn't be around long enough to do it. There are others who can do it, of course. But you need to understand, if you're going to think about it, that it's a really serious thing to do. Like I said, it's irreversible, and it's probably better not to do it if you have any privacy issues; the other person can see you, only your face, anytime they want. You can know if she does, you can feel a mild tingling in your hand anytime she looks at you in her hand. That's how I knew my wife wanted to talk to me just now. But many people think it's an unacceptable intrusion on their privacy. As I said, though, you have plenty of time before you can get married, so you can research it and think about it."

"You sound like you really want me to be cautious, Archibald... are you saying you wouldn't recommend it?"

"No, Harry, I would just say that it's not for everyone. If I sound cautious, it's because you seem pretty enamored of the idea on the face of it, and I just want you to think about it seriously, see the possible negatives as well. You strike me as the type who would go running off and doing this because it sounded good, and I mean that as a compliment."

"Thank you. It does sound good... I'm mainly concerned about the effect on her if I died, which is not exactly impossible. Well, I'll think about it. So, you said there was nothing else that I especially needed to know about?"

"No, just the usual infighting, which I could tell you about for hours and would bore you silly, though some people would find it fascinating. It doesn't interest me that much at this point, to tell you the truth, but I do like to know what's going on."

"Better you than me," Harry joked, and they both chuckled.

Dentus looked at Harry a bit more seriously and said, "I do want to say one thing, Harry. You complimented me earlier, and I appreciate it, but I don't want you to have a wrong impression. I do think I'm a good person, hopefully better than most,

but I have done things in my career that I'm not proud of. Not that I've had anyone killed or anything," he added, smiling for a moment, "but small things, mostly. Things that seem defensible at the time, but when you look back on them, you see that you should have done things differently. I've done things that damaged the careers of a few people that I thought were bad, and bad for the Ministry... they were, in fact, but I'm still not happy with myself in retrospect." His face reflected his discomfort. "One way to put it is that I've done things that Albus would never have done. That's a high standard to aspire to, but a good one. It is true that most people who reach the level that I did have done worse things; my sins are minor by comparison. But I think you have this image of me as being... I don't know, pure, maybe. I just thought you should know. There are shades of gray in almost everything, and everyone."

Harry slowly nodded; he felt respect for Dentus for telling him that. He was a little surprised, but knew he shouldn't be. "I understand, and I appreciate your telling me that. I may be only sixteen, but there are a few things I wish I had done differently, too."

Dentus nodded his understanding. "I have to imagine that's the case with everyone. Who knows, maybe even Albus." Harry wondered whether that was the case.

They talked for a few more minutes, then Harry left the fireplace. He looked at Ginny for a few seconds, imagining being able to look at his hand and see her any time; now it seemed especially appealing. "What?" she asked.

He didn't want to suggest it to her, or bring it up, until he was sure he wanted to do it, for fear of how she would feel if he brought it up but then decided not to. "Nothing," he said. "Just happy to look at you." She beamed at him, as she did a lot, he thought. "I really enjoyed what you were doing," he added, taking her hand and doing to her what she had done to him.

She smiled. "I'm glad... oh, that does feel nice. Actually, I was kind of afraid I might be distracting you, but I couldn't help myself."

He returned the smile. "It did, but it was all right. I'm glad you did it."

"Did he tell you anything interesting?" she asked. He told her about the idea of suspending the issuing of licenses. She said, "Ron's not going to be happy if that happens, you know how he's been looking forward to Apparating. He'll know he can't do it yet even if he does get a license, but it'll be important to him just to have the license."

"I know," agreed Harry, "but unfortunately, I can't argue against it for a reason like that. Archibald thinks it's best that I don't fight it at all, and he may be right. C'mon, let's go get some dinner."

After dinner, Harry and the others had their usual Saturday evening session on using the energy of love. After over two months, he felt that everyone was making some progress, but he wasn't sure how much. The others all said they felt it was a good thing to do, though, and wanted to continue. Harry tried not to be impatient at the lack of visible progress, as he had no idea how long it would take, or even if it could be done.

Later, all except Pansy were together doing their homework in the Gryffindor common room. "Sometimes I feel like I can never get caught up with all this stuff," grumbled Ron as he worked on a History of Magic essay.

"I know what you mean," agreed Neville. "Even Hermione's having trouble getting it all done." Hermione looked up at him sharply. Neville didn't notice, but Harry and Ron did.

"What, is that something you don't want us to know?" asked Ron. "Don't worry, Hermione, we still think you're as strong with schoolwork as Harry is as a wizard."

She rolled her eyes. "It's not like I need you to think of me a certain way, Ron. It's just that... I hadn't noticed that I looked like that. I didn't think it was anything anybody could tell."

Neville shrugged. "Maybe only someone who spends a lot of time with you would notice. Sorry, I didn't think my saying that would bother you."

"It doesn't, Neville, really. I was just surprised. Oh, Neville, Harry, you're going to be ready to retake your Astronomy O.W.L.s, right?"

Neville and Harry looked at each other blankly. "When did this happen?" asked Harry.

Hermione tried to avoid rolling her eyes again. "It's been up on the bulletin board for a week now. Am I the only one who reads it?"

"Probably," said Ron offhandedly. "Have you ever learned anything worth knowing from it?"

"Yes, Ron. I learned when the Astronomy O.W.L. re-test is. Or, I would have learned if I hadn't already known. Professor McGonagall had me put it up on the board. You know, as part of my prefect duties. You remember prefect duties, don't you, Ron?"

Ron adopted an obviously put-on expression of surprise. "Oh, that's right, I'm a prefect! Have I missed anything important?"

Unimpressed, she replied, "Nothing that you would consider important, anyway. I think Professor McGonagall got used to the idea that I would do all the stuff that both of us would normally do."

"Are you not happy about that, or just giving me a hard time?" he asked. "I thought you liked doing stuff like that. You never complained about it before."

"I'm giving you a hard time, mostly, but it occurs to me now that I should have insisted that you do your share the whole time. I suppose it's my fault. Now that my schedule has gotten really tight, it's annoying."

Ron shrugged. "Then I'll do the stuff. Just let me know which stuff you want me to do. Why's your schedule any worse than usual, anyway?"

"It's the end of the year, Ron. You know, exams? Which reminds me, Harry, what are you going to do for exams for your students?"

Harry had thought about it. "I wanted to do what Remus did with us, the obstacle course, but I realized I couldn't, because I didn't teach the same stuff as he did, you know, the hinkypinks and stuff. So, it's basically going to be simple, I'll give them ten minutes apiece alone, and try to figure out how well they can do the stuff they've been taught. I just have to decide whether to take points off for people who obviously know how to do something, but just can't do it very well."

"Be nice to them," said Neville, with a small smile. "That used to be me, after all."

Harry shook his head. "Seems like a long time ago, Neville. I forget you were like that."

"I never do," Neville said quietly. "Especially how it changed."

A little embarrassed, Harry said, "I really think you give me more credit for that than I deserve, Neville, but thank you anyway."

"I'm the one in a position to know, Harry. You'd better stop being embarrassed about it. So just accept my gratitude and shut up."

The others raised their eyebrows and chuckled. Smiling-it was always amusing when Neville tried to be authoritative-Harry said, "Yes, sir," and saluted.

Puzzled, Neville asked, "What was that you just did?"

"Well, it was just a regular-" He looked at Hermione, who nodded. "Wizards don't do that, Harry." She explained to the rest of them.

"Ah, I see," said Neville. "I thought you might have been giving me a rude gesture. Not something you'd normally do, so I was wondering."

"I've been a wizard for six years now, and I still do Muggle stuff like that without knowing... I wonder if I'll still be when I'm forty. Anyway, yeah, I'm not going to give them a written test. All I care about is whether they can do the stuff, which I told them at the beginning of the term. Of course, this put the fifth years at a disadvantage, since they have to take O.W.L.s, but I'd rather they could defend themselves better, even if they do less well on the written sections. Sorry, Ginny."

She looked up from her parchment. "You know I'm not bothered, Harry. I think I'll do fine anyway, and you've reminded us of that in class several times, and told us to look in our books for the information. I don't think anybody minds. I think

we'll do better than usual anyway. I mean, look what happened to you guys last year who'd been in the D.A. This year, with you teaching, it's been like a big D.A. Nobody doesn't care about what they're doing, and they're happy with what you've taught."

"Well, you're biased, though," he said humorously.

Her expression told him that his attempt at humor had missed badly. "Do you think I would lie to you, or say something like that just because of how I feel about you? Don't you?"

"I was kidding, Ginny," he said, sighing. "Of course I don't think that. I know you wouldn't lie to me."

She looked at him, seemingly trying to decide whether to be annoyed at him or not. "It's just irritating the way you relentlessly brush off compliments. I mean what I say, and it's not because I love you. It makes me feel like I shouldn't bother, because you always argue, you never just accept it. But I want to do it, because it's the truth. I want you to know how I see you."

My keen sense of intuition is telling me that I shouldn't argue with her about this, Harry thought wryly. "I know, Ginny. You know I have a problem with this. I'll work on it. I don't want to upset you."

"Why is Harry the one who has to work on it?" asked Ron.

"Because, Ron, the alternative is that Ginny stops complimenting him," explained Hermione. "I don't think he really wants that."

"I wouldn't think so," said Neville. "I'll take all the compliments I can get." He looked meaningfully at Hermione.

She smiled. "You're so sweet," she said.

He smiled and looked at Harry. "See? Just enjoy it, Harry."

Harry chuckled. "I know, I'll try. And no, Ginny, I don't want you to stop complimenting me. I like it, even if I'm embarrassed by it. Who knows, maybe I'm embarrassed because I like it."

"I should be more tolerant," she said, looking at him sympathetically. "You had no praise at all for eleven years, then a lot after that, especially this year. Sometimes I forget how you spent the first eleven years of your life. But like Neville said, I bet you don't."

"For longer periods these days, I don't think of it," he said. "That reminds me, I need to write to Aunt Petunia and tell them I'm not coming back this summer. I keep putting it off, and I don't want them showing up at King's Cross. Maybe I should do it now, before I forget totally." He took out a new piece of parchment.

"Anyway, Neville, Harry," said Hermione, "the Astronomy re-test is on Friday the twenty-ninth, at nine p.m. So you shouldn't forget to study for that, too."

"How did that end up working?" asked Harry. "Not everyone has to do it, I guess?"

"No, they let us do it where only the ones who want to have to take it, thank goodness," she replied. "Of course, that's only fair."

Harry thought about what to write, and decided to make it as short as possible. He wrote: Dear Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, I just wanted to let you know that you needn't come get me at King's Cross this year. I'm going to be staying at the Burrow, the Weasleys' house, from now on when I'm not at Hogwarts. Please say hello to Dudley for me. Sincerely, Harry.

At Hermione's request, Harry read it to the others. After he finished, she said, "I would say it's kind of dry and unfriendly, but they really don't deserve any better, considering how they were to you."

"I didn't want to pretend I'd miss them, because I don't think they'd bother pretending either," Harry agreed.

"Speaking of Dudley," asked Ron, "do you think he's in any special danger from Malfoy? Now that Malfoy's out of here and roaming around?"

"I don't think so," said Harry. "He's still got that sensor, but I should ask the Aurors about that. Maybe I can get them to give me something that would recognize the signal, too. I should probably be there if someone attacks him."

The others exchanged dismayed looks. Neville said, "Good idea, Harry, because that's what we want, you running into dangerous situations that could be dealt with by Aurors." The others were clearly surprised by Neville's sarcasm, but agreed with the sentiment. Neville had an eyebrow raised at Harry, daring Harry to contradict him.

Harry met Neville's eyes. "He is my cousin, Neville, and while he's not my favorite person in the world, it's because of me that he's in any danger. I feel like I should be sure to be around in that kind of situation."

"But the Death Eaters might guess that, Harry, and attack him to draw you there, like Malfoy used Ginny to lure you into the Chamber. You shouldn't be going anywhere they'd expect you to go. You really should let the Aurors do it." The others nodded, concerned that Harry would ignore Neville's advice.

"He's right, Harry, you really shouldn't," agreed Hermione.

"I agree with Hermione, Harry, and you know how seldom that happens," said Ron, to everyone's amusement except Hermione's.

"But Dumbledore said Voldemort doesn't think to go after people like family members," pointed out Harry.

"No, Harry, that's not quite right," argued Hermione. "What you told us he said was that Voldemort doesn't do that for these purposes of creating terror. If he

wants to intimidate someone, he'll just threaten or hurt them, he'd figure it's far more effective. But he clearly does do such things if he thinks they'll cause a clear, direct reaction that benefits him. Last year, when he knew how close you were to Sirius, he sent you those images knowing it would get you to come. He doesn't know that you and Dudley aren't that close, he might assume you are, and that it would work as well. I know how stubborn you are, Harry, but you have to see my point."

Harry sighed, frustrated. "I have mentioned, haven't I, that I hate it when you're right?"

"Once or twice," she affirmed, with a small smile.

"All right, I won't try to get the Aurors to let me help if that happens. Come to think of it, they might not have let me anyway."

"That's true, they're pretty smart," commented Neville. They got back to their homework, as Harry wondered how he was going to find the time to study for the Astronomy O.W.L., and whether he even should. What was he going to need an Astronomy O.W.L. for, anyway?

Harry woke the next morning at six o'clock, unusually early for a Sunday. He didn't go back to sleep because of the content of his last dream of the night; it was another one involving Dumbledore. Dumbledore was talking to him, but it was as though it was from a great distance, and Harry could barely make out what he was saying. Harry's best guess was that it was something to the effect that he shouldn't worry, that everything would be all right. I wish that were true, he thought.

He would have gone to breakfast, but he wanted to wait for the others, especially Ginny. So he went to the common room and chatted with some people who had gotten up early, and ten minutes later, Hermione came out of her dormitory. Remembering an idea he'd had yesterday, he asked her if she'd help him research something in the library later. She said, "Sure, I'll probably be spending most of my time there today anyway, except for the Neville hour. I try really hard to set aside an hour a day for him. I wish it could be more, but sometimes it's tough to do even that much."

"Same thing with me and Ginny," he agreed. "Fortunately, I don't have to work quite as hard on homework as you do. Because of Auror training, today's my only free day, and I definitely want some time with Ginny."

"Then you shall have it," said Ginny from behind as she ran a hand through his hair affectionately. "It's nice to hear you talking about me when you think I'm not there. Especially when you're saying nice things about me."

He turned, smiled, and mouthed 'I love you' to her, which she did in return. The three of them talked until Ron and Neville came down almost a half hour later. After breakfast, Hermione and Neville went off to the library, while Ron, Harry, and

Ginny decided to have a fly. To Harry's surprise, Pansy joined them, saying she'd never really taken the time to fly, and that she'd like to try it. They flew slowly and easily at first to help Pansy acclimate, then flew as fast as she could keep up with. After a while Harry and Ron raced on their Firebolts, while the girls watched with amusement; Harry thought he heard Pansy make a comment about men being competitive as they passed once.

Afterwards, Harry headed to the library, letting Ron and Ginny assume it was something to do with schoolwork. He found Hermione with several books spread out in front of her, as usual. "Oh, Harry, that's right, you wanted my help with something. What was it?"

"Are you familiar with something called the Joining of Hands?" he asked.

"Sure. It's not talked about in our usual texts, but it's mentioned in some of the outside reading I've-" She broke off and eyed him curiously. "You want to do it, don't you? That's why you're asking."

"I'm thinking about it," he replied. "I only found out about it yesterday, and it sounds like something I'd like to do. I want to know more about it before I even talk about it with Ginny. But yes, I'm interested in doing it."

She smiled. "That's so like you, Harry. I should have guessed that you'd be a total romantic once you fell in love. You don't do anything halfway, if you think it's important. Okay, let's go look for some books on it."

As Harry expected, she quickly found several books mentioning the subject, and wizarding wedding customs in general. They started looking through them, and a half hour later, they talked about what they'd found. They had confirmed everything Dentus had said about it, and found a few new bits of information, such as that when the two people spoke to each other, the one listening heard the voice in their head, not out loud. They found no information about negative effects, and Harry discovered that his mind was made up. "I'm going to ask her," he told Hermione.

"Why am I not surprised," she said. Then, more seriously, she asked, "Are you doing this because she's insecure about losing you? Because, since this is irreversible, it's a way of committing to her more strongly?"

He thought for a minute, and said, "Not exactly, though that's a really good thing about it. It's mainly that it'll be very convenient, and I like the idea that I can see her any time I want. I suppose it's also the case that I like the symbolism of it, and it could help with her insecurity. But I'd want to do it anyway. And thanks for helping me with this, I know you're really busy."

"I always have time for a friend who's thinking about a major life decision," she said humorously. "Good luck." He thanked her, and left.

Harry and Ginny were going to head out to their favorite couples' spot after lunch, but had to wait for a half hour because two Ravenclaw seventh years were already there. Ginny wanted to go as soon as they saw the Ravenclaws leave the spot, but Harry wanted to wait for them to return to the castle, so they wouldn't pass them on the way. She chided him for caring, especially since the Ravenclaws were doing just the same thing she and he would be.

Harry waited until they had been there for about fifteen minutes, then brought the subject up. "Do you know about a marriage custom called the Joining of Hands?"

"Not much, just a little. Only because Mum has a friend who had it done, she told me about it once. Why?"

Harry wondered if Ginny wasn't as quick to catch on as Hermione, or if she didn't want to reach the same conclusion for fear she might be wrong and look bad. "I was thinking... I'd like us to do it."

She looked at him as if scrutinizing his eyes carefully for any hints of doubt. "Are you serious? You know it's permanent, right?"

"I know," he said, looking into her eyes. "I want to do it."

She gave him a brilliant smile and melted into his arms. "Of course I want to. I even daydreamed about this once, I imagined looking into my palm and seeing you, I can't believe you want to. It's funny, in a way it's like you're asking me to marry you. You know this is done at weddings, right?"

"I know, but you know how I feel about this. I want to be with you for the rest of my life, so I just assumed we'd get married. I just haven't asked because we're still way too young."

She kissed him on the cheek a few times, then held him again. "I almost don't know what to say. Sometimes when I think of how you feel about me, I think about how the first years feel about you. You have a hard time accepting it, and so do I. You really don't care that I'll be able to see you anytime I want by looking at my hand?"

He shook his head. "I think it'll be great."

"Of course, it won't be for a long time until we can do this, either," she pointed out.

"No," he said. "I want to do this now."

She was startled. "Now? We can't do it now, like you said, we're too young to get married! Much as I'd love to..."

"Hermione was helping me research it earlier," he said. "It's usually done as part of a wedding ceremony, but there's no law that says it has to be; it can be done

anytime. As for our ages, I can do it since I'm of age. You can do it if you have your parents' permission."

"I think they'd give it," she said, smiling cautiously. "Mum would want to, and Dad wouldn't argue, he'd probably be okay too. It would be great to have it now, but I'd always pictured it as part of a wedding ceremony. I'm curious, why do you want to do it now especially?"

"I heard that it's best if the strongest wizard possible performs the spell. Dumbledore knows it, he's done it before. I want him to be the one to do it."

Her expression became somber. "And he's not going to be able to be there at our wedding..." She nodded. "I understand. Yes, Harry, I want to do it. I'm so amazed and excited that you want to, I can't believe it. How soon can we talk to Mum and Dad?"

"I was thinking... after we're finished here, we'll go to Dumbledore and ask him for permission to talk to your parents, we can use Fawkes. If they say yes, then we'll ask him at dinner tonight."

She looked at him, even more in love than before, hard as that was for him to imagine. "I adore you, Harry. I just feel so... I don't have words for what I want to say. You've made me very, very happy." She kissed him passionately, with an energy she never had before. He lost himself in the feeling, thinking of nothing else.

Dumbledore gave his permission for Harry and Ginny to visit the Weasleys, and Molly excitedly gave her permission before asking Arthur, which amused him. "I see it's not necessary for me to say anything, but I'll just say that even if I didn't approve, I would never say no, because I can see how strongly you two feel about it. I do approve, in any case. I assume you've thought this through?"

Arthur was clearly not totally reassured to know that Harry had thought about it for only a day, and Ginny for an hour, but after asking them some questions, he was satisfied that they sufficiently knew what they were getting into to have it done. They all talked for a half hour or so more, then Harry and Ginny returned to Hogwarts.

They spent the rest of the afternoon studying, then took Fawkes to Dumbledore's quarters to have their Sunday dinner with him. They talked about Dumbledore's career, and Ginny asked questions about his wife. After they had finished eating, Harry remembered something he had wanted to ask about. As he started to speak, Harry caught himself as he was about to say 'Sir...' Dumbledore had requested that both Harry and Ginny simply call him Albus at the dinners, since they were there as friends, not headmaster, teacher, and student. It had been hard for Harry to get used to, and even harder for Ginny.

"Albus, I wanted to mention these dreams I've been having... seems like I'm always dreaming about something, last year it was from Voldemort, then recently the Veil, and now... for a few weeks, ever since I found out, you've appeared in my dreams maybe three or four times a week. Nothing really happens in them, I just see your face, it's all very vague. A few times I barely remembered the dream at all, and I only noticed it because it's happened several times. Do you think it means anything?"

Dumbledore considered. "Well, the obvious interpretation would be that it may be part of the process of your adjusting to my departure. Our minds operate on both conscious and unconscious levels, and each one may do things differently. You had no particular impressions from anything in the dreams?"

"In the one this morning, it seemed like you were trying to tell me not to worry, that everything would be all right, but I couldn't tell for sure. When I woke up, all I could think was, everything would be all right if you weren't leaving, but I knew that wasn't going to happen. Do you think I'm just dreaming that because I want it to be the case?"

"Dreams are so subjective that it is difficult to say. It is not impossible, of course. One possibility, more spiritually based, is that your spirit knows that there is nothing to worry about, that our spirits will meet again, as yours will with Sirius and your parents. You do not have the context to understand this properly in your physical form, so you are given assurances which you cannot help but find vague."

"So, you think we have spirits?" asked Ginny.

"Yes, Ginny, I do. I have not had a spiritual encounter personally with someone who has passed beyond the physical realm, but I have talked to many who have. My talent as a Legilimens was not required to know that these mystics are genuine, compassionate, and highly spiritually developed. They describe communication with those who have passed away, contact with spiritual beings, and an understanding of the nature of the universe which we in the physical realm cannot fully comprehend."

"Why couldn't we comprehend it?" Harry wondered.

"Because our minds are not equipped to, and our language lacks the concepts required. To make an analogy, we have five senses, and even those do not accept all the information they could. There are sounds we cannot hear, colors we cannot see. Dogs can smell things we cannot. We are equipped to live in our physical world; our bodies are tools that enable us to do so. But it is not so strange to think that in other realms, there are types of sensory input, ideas, or information which we could not process, lacking the proper senses or frame of reference to do so."

"Is that the kind of thing that ghosts can understand, since they're not physical anymore?" asked Ginny.

"I don't think so," answered Harry before Dumbledore did. "I talked to Nick about Sirius after he died, I was hoping he would come back a ghost, but Nick said he wouldn't. He said that ghosts are mainly there because they're afraid to move on to whatever's next, they like the comfort and familiarity of their surroundings. So I'd guess they wouldn't know that kind of stuff."

"Harry is right, though perhaps Nick is being too hard on himself," said Dumbledore. "It may be better to say that they are drawn here, that they feel they still have something to do or resolve. Granted, some stay for less high-minded reasons, such as Myrtle, who wished to haunt those who had mocked her, and has become ensconced in a despair of her own making. She seems terribly sad, but she is comfortable. But yes, ghosts have no greater spiritual insight than do the still living."

"Just as an example, Albus, I'm wondering... what will happen to Myrtle, eventually? Will she just stay at Hogwarts, in that toilet, forever?"

"No, Harry, she will not, nor will any ghost. They will move on when they feel ready to do so. For some it may take a few days; for others, five hundred years, but it really does not matter. We all do what we do at our own pace. Myrtle will eventually feel bored or restless, and will choose to move on."

"So, then, what happens after they, after we, move on? You said I would see you, Sirius, and my parents again?"

"Yes, you will. Time works differently in the nonphysical realms, so it is not as though your parents will have to wait for, say, seventy years to commune with you. To them it will seem as though no time has passed. We take the idea of time for granted, but it has relevance only to us."

Now Harry was confused. "How can there be any place where there's no such thing as time? Everything we do takes time, and even if we were existing as spirits, wouldn't we still be thinking, and wouldn't that take time?"

"In a sense, yes," Dumbledore explained, "but in a sense, no. Think about how we measure time, by the movement of the planets, of physical objects in the universe. In the spiritual realm, there are no physical objects, so how would time be measured? In the nonphysical realm, things may feel as if they take time, but they do not; everything happens at the same time. I know this is difficult to comprehend, as it starts to reach the conceptual constraints our physicality imposes on us."

"But to answer your question about what happens after we move on, the answer is, we do what we choose. Many may return to the physical realm; this is what is called reincarnation. We have new bodies, a new identity, but the same spirit. Some may stay in the nonphysical realm, or move on to other physical realms. The concept of infinity is another that our minds are not equipped to handle well, but there is an infinite number of realities of which we may choose to experience, and an infinite

amount of time for us to do it in. Our spirits are eternal, they can never die. Our bodies die, but they are meant to, so that we may have a variety of experience. That is why I am not disturbed about leaving. I know that, as your dream said, it will be all right."

Harry was silent, not knowing what to say. Finally he said, "It's funny... if someone else, one of these mystics, maybe, had told me this, I would have thought that it was an interesting theory, and maybe it was true, but we couldn't know, or at least I couldn't know. But you telling me is more like, it must be true, since Albus said it was."

Dumbledore chuckled. "I appreciate the compliment, but there are many sources of accurate information; it is simply a matter of recognizing them. Legilimency is a help in such matters, though most people learn in time to distinguish those who understand what they are talking about from those who do not. Still, Harry, that does bring up something I wished to discuss with you. Before I depart, I would like to teach you Legilimency, or at least, start the process. You could get by without it, but it is a highly useful skill to have. I am confident that you can be well along the road in learning it by the time I must go. I know it is another imposition on your already limited free time, but-"

"Albus, you know there's nothing I'd rather do than spend my limited free time with you, even if it was just to watch the sunset. I'd really like to learn it, also. It would really help me in dealing with Ministry types. Even with Archibald's help, I still feel lost sometimes."

"Yes, it would be beneficial in that regard in particular. Let us say, then, we should set aside forty-five minutes a day for the purpose. Is there a particular time of day that suits you?"

Harry had started to think about it when Ginny spoke. "He can see you at four o'clock, after his last class, every weekday." Harry looked at her sharply; that was their usual time to spend alone, either taking a walk outside or in the couples' places. Ginny looked back forcefully with a look that said 'Don't argue with me.' Harry looked resigned and nodded.

Dumbledore looked at Ginny fondly. "It is very generous of you, Ginny, to sacrifice your time with Harry, which I know is precious to you."

"We can find other time," she said, giving Harry a loving look. "Even if it's not too long, the important thing is that I know he wants to."

"Oh, that reminds me," said Harry. "Speaking of spending time together, there's something we'd like to ask you to do."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, I know what it is, Harry. I will do it." To Harry's startled look, Dumbledore continued, "Archibald contacted me later last night and

told me of your conversation. He said he felt it was even money that you would be asking me to perform the Joining of Hands for you within the next twenty-four hours. I do not gamble, as he knows, but I would not have taken him up on it even if I did. In any case, I assumed that you went to Arthur and Molly earlier to seek their permission for Ginny, and were granted it. It would please me greatly to do as you ask."

Harry smiled. "I guess I should have somehow expected you'd know. I'm really glad you'll do it, Albus. It means a lot to me that it's you, to both of us. For some reason, I'm almost surprised that you agreed without giving me some warning; both Archibald and Arthur did, just to make sure I wasn't running rashly into something I wasn't ready for, or didn't understand."

"I am confident that you are doing it for the right reasons, so I am not concerned. I had it done myself, and it was never anything but pleasant. I am sure it will be so for you. When would you like me to do it?"

"We'd like you to do it now, if you wouldn't mind," said Ginny. "But we have to get my parents here. Mum said that her only condition for saying yes was that they got to be there when it was done. We should also get the other four," she said to Harry.

He agreed. "I'll get out the map, find out where they are, then go get them. I kind of wish I had your dog spell, that would be much better."

"Then you should use it, Harry. Mine is really quite simple. Just visualize the dog, and instruct it what to do. Then summon it, and it will go off and find the person in question."

Harry decided that his dog would be silver, and that it would be slightly larger, medium-sized, and shaggy; he had always liked long-haired dogs. He saw it in his mind, asked it to find Hermione, and lead her back to where he was. He also decided to specifically ask it to behave affectionately. Then he summoned it, and it shimmered into existence. It barked once, then went running off.

Ginny smiled with delight. "It's so cute! Harry, we should get a real dog like that someday."

"Then we will," he agreed. He felt more partial to dogs than cats; he wondered if it was because Sirius had been a dog. He focused on Ron's dog next; it went running off as well. Harry chuckled to himself. "What's so funny?" asked Ginny.

"That one was for Ron. I asked it to be extra-affectionate to him when it found him."

Ginny laughed, imagining what would happen. Harry summoned two more, one for Neville and one for Pansy. A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door of Dumbledore's quarters, and all four of his friends entered.

"That didn't look like his dog, Harry," said Hermione. "Did you do that?"

"Professor Dumbledore taught me how to do it," he said. The others looked impressed.

"It's really cute," said Hermione. "Did you make Ron's different on purpose?"

Grinning, Harry nodded. Hermione, Neville, and Pansy broke up laughing. Ron smiled tolerantly at Harry, giving him a friendly shove to the shoulder.

"I wasn't there, but I ran into them on the way, they told me what happened," said Pansy, still chuckling. "Apparently it plowed Ron over, licking his face and barely letting him up. It sounded hilarious."

"The three of us were in the common room," said Neville. "Hermione's came first, she figured out that it was probably from you. It was affectionate, but in a more normal way. The whole common room was watching, it was so unusual. Then Ron's came in, practically attacked him, and everybody was laughing really hard. It was great."

"Leave it to you, mate, to use a new spell and have a go at me at the same time," said Ron.

"He did it to me, too," pointed out Hermione. "Remember the class where we started on silent spells?"

Ron chuckled. "Ah, yes, that was good. So, were you just practicing the spell? Or did you want us here particularly?"

Harry looked at Hermione. "You didn't tell them?"

"I thought you should be the ones to do it. I was so happy when I saw the dog, I knew what it meant."

Holding Ginny around the waist, Harry said, "Ginny and I have decided to have the Joining of Hands done." Ron's eyebrows shot up, Pansy smiled, and Neville looked blank. Hermione explained it to Neville.

"That's great, you two," enthused Pansy.

"But why did you call us down here?" asked Ron. "You won't be doing it until you get married, there was nothing urgent."

"We're going to do it now, Ron," said Ginny to her brother. "Professor Dumbledore is going to do it, in the next ten minutes or so." Ron and Pansy were gaping.

"It was important to us that Professor Dumbledore be the one to do it," explained Harry. The others nodded, understanding what he meant. Turning to Dumbledore, he asked, "Should I use Fawkes to go get Arthur and Molly, or can I just ask Fawkes to do it himself?"

Fawkes disappeared. "It appears that you just did," said an amused Dumbledore. A few seconds later Arthur and Molly appeared, holding Fawkes's tail.

"Harry, Ginny, are you ready?" asked Dumbledore. They took a step toward him and said they were. "You must each now decide which hand you would like it to be," said Dumbledore.

"I hadn't thought of that," admitted Harry. He held each hand in front of his face to see which seemed better. "I guess I'll take the left, in case I want to be holding my wand at the same time." Ginny decided the same thing.

"Most people who are right-handed choose the left, and vice versa," said Dumbledore. "You should hold hands with your left hands, then. Please stand facing each other, Harry, a bit to the right, so you can comfortably hold each other's left hands." Harry felt a bit tense; not nervous, but he understood the importance of the occasion. He knew it was a turning point in his life, as falling in love with her had been. He was happy, and wanted to appreciate the moment.

Harry had read that there was no prescribed reading or speech that the one doing the spell was supposed to say, like in a wedding ceremony. He wondered if Dumbledore would say anything in particular.

"Harry, Ginny... I have performed this spell many times, and this is the first one that was not part of a wedding ceremony. Yet in a way, it is the ceremony itself. Part of the reason you do this is for the practical value of having a simple, easy way to communicate with the person with whom you would most like to communicate. But part of the reason is your desire to affirm to each other and your loved ones your intention to spend the rest of your lives together. Vows can be rescinded; this cannot.

"When I am asked to do this, if I am not acquainted with the couple, I interview them first, using my talent as a Legilimens. If I sense that they do not have a strong enough bond, or are getting married for inappropriate reasons, I decline to perform the spell. Though you two will be questioned for doing this at such a young age, rarely have I felt a bond as strong as yours. Both of you feel love in abundant quantity, you are friends, you know each other well, and you are determined that your relationship and your love will endure. This is the last time I will perform this spell, and it is an honor and a privilege that it be for the two of you, about whom I care so very much."

Harry felt himself tearing up, and was sure others there, especially Hermione, were as well. He gripped Ginny's hand a bit more tightly, and she his.

Dumbledore did not say an incantation, but waved his wand around them twice in a circle over their heads, once around their hands, then tapped their joined hands in such a way that the tip of the wand touched both their hands at the same time.

"The Joining is complete," he said. "You will now see in your hands the love that you see in each other's eyes, and feel in your hearts." They immediately looked at

their left hands. Harry saw Ginny's face; her expression was rapturous, and he knew it was because she was seeing him in her hand. While he knew that at any given time she would look normal, or bored, he also knew that she would feel the tingling they both felt in their hands now, know that he was looking at her, and smile.

They looked up from their hands at almost the same time, wearing nearly identical expressions of love and happiness. Then they kissed, and their friends clapped and cheered. Harry stepped forward and hugged Dumbledore. "Thank you, Albus," he said, fighting off tears. "It was my pleasure, Harry," Dumbledore responded, letting Harry go and getting a hug from Ginny. Then Molly hugged him, after which Arthur did too, for the first time. He then hugged all his friends, and they him, enthusiastically. "It was like you got married," said Ron as he hugged Harry. "That was how it felt," Harry said. "We just cheated on the age thing." Ron laughed and patted Harry on the back. "I'm thrilled, mate." He went to hug Hermione, who said, "It was wonderful, Harry, I'm so happy for you," then whispered, "Ron and Pansy were holding hands while Dumbledore was talking." Harry laughed, and let go of her. Having finished hugging everyone, he looked at his hand, which showed Ginny's face as she hugged Neville. She looked over at him, a loving and amused expression on her face as she felt her hand tingle.

He thought about the wedding he would no doubt have in two or three years. If he and Ginny permitted it to be so, Harry knew it would be a huge event, over which much hoopla would be made, which anyone in the wizarding world would want to attend. He knew that what he had just experienced would always be much more meaningful and precious in his memory. Then Ginny came up to him, gave him a quick kiss, and stayed with him as they talked to their friends for another half hour before leaving Dumbledore's quarters.

The six of them walked back to Gryffindor Tower, chatting happily; Pansy stayed with them until they reached the portrait hole. In the common room, they told the astounded Gryffindors what had happened; it had to be explained to many of them. They fielded the expected questions, such as whether they were too young, and accepted congratulations. A few asked to look at their hands while they looked at each other, but Harry knew from his reading that only the people themselves could see each other in their hands. Finally, he and the other four were left to themselves.

"I suppose," said Neville, "that for you, the best part of this is that you get to talk to each other even from your beds. That'll be pretty neat."

"Yes, that's an extra bonus," Ginny agreed. "The nice thing about doing it now is that if we had done it when we got married, we wouldn't have needed it so much. Because of the lack of privacy, now is when it'll be the most useful. But as far as the beds go, we can, but we have to stop when Harry does his Occlumency exercises. If I

look at him while he does that, it'll distract him, and I'm afraid that if I do it after, it might make the Occlumency less effective. So we have to stop at a certain point."

"You would anyway, of course, just to get to sleep," pointed out Hermione.

"Otherwise, you'd have a situation where, say, she's almost asleep, he looks at her, and it distracts her just enough so she can't get to sleep. So I'd imagine that for any Joined couple that weren't sleeping in the same bed, there would have to be a time at which they agreed to stop looking."

"Do you think it would wake you up, if I looked at you before you woke up?" asked Ginny.

"I don't know, I doubt it," Harry said. "The tingling isn't very strong, and I think I'm not what you'd call a light sleeper."

Ginny grinned. "That's another one of those things I'm looking forward to finding out." They all chuckled. "But I have to wait a few more years, unfortunately."

"So, am I going to hear you talking to her late at night?" asked Ron, who to Harry's surprise was not suggesting by his tone that it would be a problem.

"I don't think so," answered Hermione. "The information I read said that when the couple talks to each other, the one talking can do it in the barest whisper, and as long as it's audible, the other person will hear it fine. So I doubt it'll get through the curtains on the beds."

They talked for a while longer, and it was time to go to bed. They said good night, and Harry wondered if the others were especially watching him say goodnight to Ginny, as they would expect them to look especially happy that for them, it was not really goodnight.

Harry changed into his nightclothes and climbed into bed. He picked up Reborn From the Ashes, read it for about ten minutes, then looked at his hand. He saw Ginny talking, and he saw her smile as she felt him look at her. It was obvious that she was talking to her dormitory-mates, so Harry waited until she finished what she was saying, then whispered, "No hurry, just let me know when you're done talking to them. I love you." She smiled again as she listened to another girl talking. Harry thought about putting his hand down, but he decided to just lie there and keep watching. He knew he probably wouldn't do this much after the first few days, but it felt good right then, so he just wanted to enjoy it. He watched her talk, but couldn't hear what she was saying; it seemed that for him to hear her, she had to be talking to him.

About ten minutes later, he saw her get up and move to her own bed. At least he imagined by looking at her face that that was what she was doing, only her face showed in his hand, nothing in her background. Now she was concentrating; he imagined that she was pulling back the curtains of her bed, then changing into her

nightclothes. He assumed that her robe would go over her head at some point, but he never saw it; he guessed that he would only see her face, nothing else, and that even if she wore a mask he would still see her face. Finally, he felt his hand tingle as she looked at him.

"Have you been looking at me all this time?" he heard her ask in his head. "I can't be that interesting."

"Well, all I know is I'm very interested in you," he answered in as low a whisper as he could manage. She smiled as he added, "It's also the newness of it, of course. I probably won't look at you for so long when you're doing something else all the time. I still will sometimes, though, I imagine. Were they asking you questions?"

"Yes, they're being nice about it. They know this means I'm more or less married, and they know that they shouldn't expect me to join them that much anymore. They just wanted to know what I thought about this, why I did it, that sort of thing."

"Why did you tell them you did it?" he asked, curious.

"First, I said, this extremely desirable man is offering to chain himself to me, who am I to say no?" she said with a grin. Harry chuckled. "But they asked more seriously, and I just told them that I'm totally in love with you and I want to be close to you in whatever way I can, and that we're both hopeless romantics. They were impressed by that, and even more impressed that this was your idea. You know, of course I was joking about the chain comment, but I'm sure that this will help the next time I get an insecurity attack. That had to be somewhere in your mind when you were thinking of this."

"Yes, but like I told Hermione, I would've done this anyway," he said. "It's so great to be able to do this, what we're doing. I don't know why more people don't do it. I wanted to ask your parents why they didn't, but I thought it might be rude, so I didn't."

"Yes, we do have to be careful about acting like other people should do this, or like they're not so committed if they don't," Ginny agreed. "I can understand why some people wouldn't want to do this. There's a huge amount of trust involved, because you're giving away so much of your privacy."

"But wouldn't you have to totally trust someone anyway, to be married to them?" Harry asked.

"I suppose so, but I think for this, it's even more so. Or you could say, there are greater risks in the other person abuses it. Can you imagine what would happen if one of the people just started talking to the other person all the time, even when it wasn't wanted? You could drive a person crazy, it'd be this voice they could never get out of their head."

"When I researched it with Hermione, what we read mentioned situations like that," said Harry. "Archibald said it was a common subject for tragic popular fiction, which I can believe; there's all kinds of possibilities."

"Well, let's hope I don't get unbalanced and start talking to you all the time," she joked.

He smiled. "I'm not worried about that. He paused, then said, "I really love you. Funny, I feel like I say that too much sometimes, way more than I think most people say it."

"You can never say that too much," she said emphatically. "And besides, we can't know how much other people say it, since it's usually something people say when they're alone. My parents could say it ten times a day and I'd never know. They don't seem like they do, but you know what I mean. Don't ever feel like you're saying it too much. I promise you, that's not possible."

He nodded. "I just had a strange thought... if a year ago someone had shown me how I am now, I would've thought they were being stupid. I've changed so much, and the strange thing is, it wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for Voldemort."

"I think it would have happened anyway, just not as soon." Ginny answered. "You found this love within yourself, but that meant it was always there, it just needed a reason to come out. It would have come out when you fell in love; you just had a chance to get comfortable with it before that happened. But I see what you mean, you might not have been so unreserved about it. The Voldemort thing made you totally embrace it, because you felt like you had to."

"I did have to, believe me," he replied. "I barely got past those dreams in September. That reminds me... when I looked at you in the Chamber, and realized that I was in love with you, I also realized that you had looked at me like that once before, on the morning of the fourth dream, when you kissed me on the cheek. Do you remember that?"

"Vividly," she answered. "I was a little worried, because I thought it was obvious, like I had just revealed myself or something. I felt like I had told you I was in love with you without saying the words. I knew I couldn't say the words, because of how you felt about having a girlfriend. But I thought you might have known, and I worried that you knew but didn't feel the same way. Thank goodness I was wrong."

"No, I didn't get it from that," he said. "I knew that look meant something, I just didn't know what. But now I think a part of me did know, but refused to recognize it because I was so scared. I guess it just had to take some more time before I felt like I was ready."

They spent a while longer talking about how they fell in love and what they were thinking along the way. Finally, a half hour later than usual, they stopped talking

so Harry could do his Occlumency before he slept. They signed off by saying 'I love you,' which Harry felt sure would be the way they would do that every night. He did his Occlumency practice, and was asleep soon after that. He dreamed, and there was Dumbledore again, saying that everything would be all right, a bit more clearly this time. When he woke up, he again barely remembered it.

They had decided the night before to, as a test, look at the other one as soon as they got up, so that one would see the other sleeping, and see whether it woke them up. Harry felt the mild tingling as soon as he woke, and looked at his hand to see Ginny's smiling face. He smiled back at her and asked, "How long have you been looking?"

"About ten minutes," she said. "It's safe to say that it doesn't wake you up, anyway. It was nice to watch you sleep, you looked very peaceful."

"I'll have to try to wake up earlier than you sometime soon, so I can see how you look," he replied. They didn't talk to each other on their hands for very long, because they would be able to talk in person soon.

Pansy joined the other five earlier than usual, eating with them instead of joining them after she ate. "I guess this means you want a report," said Ginny as they sat down. Pansy nodded. "It was really nice," Ginny continued. "It was what I imagine it's like when you're married, you can lie down in bed together and talk to each other, really relaxed. Except for not being able to touch him, that is. But you're lying down, you're going to sleep soon, but you can talk, you can see him. It's wonderful." Her face and smile made the last words unnecessary, Harry thought.

He and Ginny answered questions about it through most of breakfast, and talked about how it would affect them in their classes. "I'll bet," Ginny said, "that now all my teachers will be on the lookout for me looking into my hand. I'll have to be careful."

"Well, you can look anytime you want, as far as I'm concerned," said Harry. "If I'm teaching, I won't be able to respond, of course, but that doesn't mean you can't look, or tell me something quick if you want to."

"I'll try not to talk to you, that could be a bit distracting. But I might look."

"But you can see him all the time anyway," pointed out Ron. "What's the point of looking when you can't even talk to him?"

The girls all looked amused that he would ask the question. "I know that looking at Harry doesn't have the same appeal for you that it does for me, Ron, but—"

"You know what I mean," said Ron, rolling his eyes.

"I know. Just having fun. I think it's something about being in love, when you look, you don't just see the other person, you see their love for you. I don't know if I

can explain it more than that. It just feels really good." Harry thought that was a good enough explanation.

A little later, as he walked into his morning class, he was surprised to get a round of applause from his first years. He looked at them quizzically; Helen looked a little annoyed at his being dense, and said, "It's because you got married, Professor."

"Well, not exactly, but-"

"Close enough," she interrupted, then looked embarrassed, realizing what she'd done; the students knew they weren't supposed to interrupt professors.

"Sorry, sir," she said, to chuckles from Harry and the other students. "But Pansy told us all about it when she got back last night. It sounded like a wedding. I know it's not really, but she said in a way it's even more than that. You can't take back what you did."

"Why did you do that, sir?" asked David Septus.

"Because he's really brave," joked Hedrick, prompting Augustina to throw a quill at him, to general laughter.

"Because he loves her," said Helen, pointedly, to Hedrick.

"Yes, of course that's true," said Harry, "but lots of people who love each other don't have this done, and it doesn't mean they love each other any less. I guess it's just different for different people; some would be comfortable with this, some wouldn't be." Just as he finished the sentence, he felt his hand tingle. He thought they might be interested to know, since they were asking about it, so he told them. "Talk to her!" urged Helen, and the others seemed interested for him to as well. He looked at his hand and spoke in a normal tone so his students could hear what he was saying.

"You're in class, how is it you can look at me? You can answer, my students wanted me to answer you."

He listened to her answer, then said to the class, "She's in Herbology and they're looking at plants, so she can talk a little." To her, he said, "I bet Professor Sprout will know, she'll say something to me later. By the way, Hedrick said he thinks the reason I did this is that I'm really brave." He glanced up and grinned at Hedrick, who now looked embarrassed as the class roared its laughter.

"That'll teach you," said Augustina.

Harry listened for the answer. Looking at Hedrick, he said, "She laughed, and she said, 'Tell him I agree with him.'" Now Hedrick smiled as the rest laughed. "I'd better get back to my class now," he said to her, and put down his hand. He had to spend another ten minutes answering questions about the Joining before he could get on with his class.

In the staff room later, he got another round of applause when he walked in. Embarrassed, he accepted their congratulations. "Definitely the youngest married couple we've ever had at Hogwarts," commented Flitwick. "And yes, I know it's not a legal marriage, but it's a marriage all the same. You just got around the laws."

"What I wonder is, is this going to inspire other younger couples to do the same thing," said Professor Vector. "We could see a surge in this kind of thing, once it becomes known that you did it."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "I'd hate to think that somebody would do this just because I did."

"People now say 'Voldemort' just because you did," pointed out Flitwick.

"But that's different," argued Harry. "We have to be able to say his name to fight him. People don't have to be able to talk to each other on their hands."

"No, but it's what it represents," responded Flitwick. "It means that you're so in love that you'll brush aside any risks, and do what your heart tells you to do even though you don't have to, when the prudent thing would be to wait. Romantics will swoon over it, and regular people will give it a thought where they might not have before. It's also a strong endorsement of the idea of commitment. But then, you probably didn't think about how it would look to anybody but you and Ginny, did you?" Harry shook his head. "Well, if this picks up in the next few years, we'll know why," Flitwick concluded.

"I think it's wonderful, Harry," said Sprout. "But you will tell your beloved not to talk to you any more from my class, won't you?"

Harry smiled as the teachers chuckled. "I don't think she'll do it again," he said. "It's just so new, I suppose."

"If I see you so much as look at your palm in Potions, Professor, for whatever reason," said Snape, "I will give Miss Weasley a detention."

Harry chuckled, as he had no intention of coming close to that with Snape around, but McGonagall bristled. "That would be absolutely inappropriate, Professor," she reprimanded him. "You should not penalize one student for the conduct of another."

"He did, earlier this year," Snape pointed out, referring to the Snackboxes.

"He's right about that," Harry conceded. "Of course, I didn't goad her into it, like that time. But obviously he's not serious, Professor," he said to McGonagall. To Snape's sharp glance, he quickly amended, "I mean, I don't doubt that he would do it, but he knows I'm not going to do that. I'm on my best behavior in his class."

"Really," commented Flitwick dryly. "And what sort of behavior do the rest of us get from you?"

Harry thought for a minute. "My normal behavior, I guess."

Flitwick chuckled. "I suppose that will do." They talked more about his situation and his impulsive nature, eventually moving off of him as a topic of conversation. Harry reminded himself to be careful about looking anywhere near his hand in Potions.

The next few days and weeks, as usual, passed quickly. Harry found Legilimency very difficult at first, but started to get a feeling for it after the third lesson, which Dumbledore assured him was rapid progress. Harry felt it was because Dumbledore was such a good teacher. He wondered how much of it was because of the close relationship they had; neither had any reservations about opening his mind to the other, which Harry felt helped him to learn faster. In the seventh lesson, he finally was able to slip into Dumbledore's mind and see images, which were all of love. Harry was very pleased at the breakthrough, but wondered why he and Dumbledore saw such images when they visited each other's minds, but last year with Snape, it had only been images of pain and embarrassment.

"It all depends on the state of mind of the Legilimens," Dumbledore explained. "Professor Snape's state of hostility toward you was reflected in how he used the skill, and it summoned images consistent with that. It could be argued that he did so because such images will give the one studying extra incentive to shut the invader out, but such extreme measures are not necessary, as was proven later with you. Keeping out a friendly mind and a hostile mind are two different things, but a better approach is to learn the easier one first, then the more difficult one."

"So if I practiced with anyone else, their images would be ones of love, the same way," Harry guessed.

Dumbledore nodded. "If they were not, it would mean that you harbored hostility toward that person, and certainly should not be practicing with them. I was going to mention, Harry, that I think it would be advisable for you to practice this with one of your friends, if they are willing. It would assist you greatly, but I do have one caution: it should not be Ginny with whom you practice. I am not suggesting that you would accidentally see something either of you would find objectionable, but it is best not to do that with someone with whom one has an intimate relationship."

Harry doubted there was anything in his memory that he wouldn't want Ginny to see, and thought the reverse was probably true as well, but he could see the reason for it as a general principle. "I understand," he said. "I'll ask someone else." Even though he didn't know who it would be as he started speaking, in a few seconds it was clear to him who he would ask.

After the session, he went to the library and sat next to the ever-present Hermione. He explained what had happened in his lesson with Dumbledore, and what

Dumbledore had recommended. She nodded, saying, "Yes, I can really see what problems could arise. I assume you're here because you want to practice with me."

He nodded. "You're the perfect person. I can't use Ginny, and Ron might do it but he'd be mortified. Pansy or Neville would be possible, but neither of them studied Occlumency like you did before the beginning of the year. You could make me work harder to get in, and help me get better faster. But, and I mean this, I don't want you to do it if you're not comfortable. I mean, when Dumbledore did it with me, it was just images of love, not like with Snape, nothing I'd be embarrassed to have a friend see. I assume it would be the same with you. But, again-

"All right, Harry," she said, amused. "I appreciate your concern, but like you said, I'm sure it'll be fine. Yes, I'll help you. When would you like to do it?"

"Would now be okay? I just finished the lesson with Dumbledore, it would be fresher in my mind."

"Yes, okay," she agreed. "Probably I could use a break anyway. Your office?"

"Yeah, that's the best place. I'll tell Ginny while you're getting your books together." He held up his hand, and her face appeared. He saw her smile, then his hand tingled. "How was the Legilimency lesson?" she asked.

"Really good, I made kind of a breakthrough," he said quietly, but not a whisper; he didn't mind if Hermione heard. "He suggested I practice with someone else, but that it not be you. He said there can be problems if couples do that."

He saw her nod. "Probably there wouldn't be a problem, but it makes sense. Hermione, right?"

"Not too tough to figure that out, I see. Yeah, we're going to my office. I'll let you know when we're done." He saw her blow him a kiss, and chuckled. "I love you," he said, now whispering, and put down his hand.

Having collected her books, Hermione got up and walked with him out of the library. "Just curious, Harry, were you whispering so I couldn't hear you, or so anyone else couldn't?"

"Anyone else," he said. "It doesn't embarrass you that we do that, does it?"

"Of course not, Harry, this is me," she said, as if he needn't have asked. "You're thinking of Ron. You know I think it's wonderful that you do that, I would always encourage you."

"Just making sure. No, I didn't think I needed to bother keeping my voice down that low. Still getting used to the Joining, I don't want to do anything to look stupid. I don't mind looking stupid in front of you, of course." He looked at Hermione, then continued, "You know, I really appreciate that about you, that I can trust you like that, and be so comfortable around you. I might be embarrassed about something, but I know you'd always be nice about it."

"Thank you, Harry, that means a lot to me. And while we're on the subject of appreciation, I wanted to thank you for the fact that you and Ginny haven't asked me or Neville if we wanted to be Joined too, or suggested that we do it. Not that it would have been terrible if you had, but it just shows you're being sensitive."

"'Sensitive' isn't one of the compliments I've heard a lot," he joked, "but I was able to figure that one out. It would just seem rude and arrogant to think everyone else should do what we did. Even though we decided to do it fast, I know it's a big thing."

"It did make us think about it, of course," she said. "We talked about it, and it probably made us talk about our future sooner than we would have. We know it's still really early for that, and we know we don't have to decide whether we want to be together for the rest of our lives just because you did. I don't think either of us feels any pressure. We're happy with how things are now, and we graduate in another year, so there's no hurry. I could definitely imagine marrying him, and I think, I hope, he feels the same way about me. I don't want to put too much pressure on him. But if we did decide to get married, I could imagine it as something I'd be interested in doing. You two certainly seem happy with it so far."

"Seems that way," he agreed. "I guess you can see what happens with us, see if there are any problems or not."

She chuckled as they entered his office. "I certainly hope there aren't. I don't think there will be." She put her bag on the floor. "Okay, so should I try to resist it, or just let you get in if you can?"

"I think it's better if you don't resist at first. I just now got to the point where I could get into his mind, and that was without him resisting. If you resisted, I might not be able to do anything at all." She nodded, and they started. He tried to penetrate her mind as Dumbledore had shown him, but he had lost the feeling for it that he'd had with Dumbledore a while ago. He tried for ten minutes, apologizing once for keeping her from her studying, which amused her. Finally, he was successful; trying to enter her mind, he saw a series of images. She was about five years old, obviously just having cried, being comforted by her mother. She was in one of the couples' places, telling Neville she loved him, then kissing him. She was hugging Harry in his dormitory the morning after the fifth Voldemort dream, him telling her how much he appreciated her help. She was hugging her father, who appeared to have just returned from a trip, at age nine. She was lying in her dormitory bed, hugging Crookshanks. Harry withdrew from her mind.

"Finally," he said.

"Harry, to be able to do that after only seven days of study is really impressive. You should be proud."

He was gratified to hear her say so. "I suppose I am, I guess I'm just not patient with myself. I know it's a very complicated skill. I feel like it's this tiny crack in your mind that I can get in through, and it's really hard to find. But now I sort of have it, I think I could do it again. Now I want you to resist, to use what you learned about Occlumency in August."

"Okay, give me a minute to concentrate," she said. She closed her eyes for a few seconds, and said, "Okay, go ahead." He cast the spell again, searching for the spot he'd just found. It was elusive, but he concentrated... there it was. He started in, but was stopped. He felt a kind of barrier that he didn't know how to get past. He tried for a few seconds, then felt the effort of trying becoming too much, his concentration fading. He withdrew.

"I found my way in that time, but you blocked me," he said. "I'll try again in a minute, just keep doing what you did." After a minute, he cast the spell again. He found his way in, he was blocked. He poked and prodded around, looking for a way past the barrier. He would not try to break through by force; not only would it be an aggressive act, but he worried that it might provoke the kind of memories Snape had provoked in him, a chance he refused to take. He kept probing... and suddenly he saw her holding him, telling him she loved him, the first time anyone had ever told him that. He saw her hugging Ron in the Great Hall after he'd read her card, her whispering that she loved him, him whispering 'I love you, too' back to her. He saw her and Neville sitting on a bed, reaching over to kiss each other, naked from the waist up-

He recoiled, breaking the connection so fast that it was almost a physical sensation. He looked at her, mortified. "Hermione, I'm so sorry, I had no idea-"

She cut him off with a look. "It's not your fault, Harry. I wanted to help you, it's a chance I took. I was hoping that wouldn't come up, but it's not the end of the world. I know you didn't want to see it, don't feel like you did something wrong."

He felt like she should be angry with him. "I would never have asked, believe me, if I'd known that was there. How in the world-never mind, I shouldn't be asking that..." He trailed off in further embarrassment.

She smiled a little, embarrassed for him more than for herself. "You thought we wouldn't have had enough privacy for anything like that. It was over Easter vacation, at the Burrow when their parents weren't home. Ginny arranged it and stood guard for us." She paused, then asked, "Are you angry with me for letting you do that, knowing you could find that?"

His eyebrows raised in surprise at the thought. "Of course not! I just feel terrible for violating your privacy. Look, I'll try this with Pansy-"

"You know you can't do that, Harry, you're not thinking," she cut him off. "She would do it if she had to, she cares for you that much, but think about who's involved in a lot of her memories." Harry immediately understood Hermione's point; he knew that no memories of love of Pansy's would feature Malfoy, but memories of him would be bound to come up from time to time if Harry practiced with her. "Not to mention," added Hermione, "that she's ashamed of a lot of her past, and you could conceivably see anything. It would be really difficult for her."

He nodded solemnly. "I didn't think of that," he admitted.

"You would have, if you weren't trying so hard to think of someone else to do it besides me, because you're embarrassed at what you saw," she observed. "But I'm the person to do this with, you said so yourself. Ron would make a terrible candidate, you can't with Ginny, and Neville has the same memory I do. This skill could be important, and you only have a little time while Dumbledore's still around. You'll have to practice with someone after he's gone. Who? It has to be me. Don't feel bad. I'm a little embarrassed that you saw that, but I'll deal with it. You dealt with embarrassment, over love, to fight Voldemort. I can deal with this, to help you."

His emotional reaction was subsiding, and he was able to think more rationally; he could see the sense in what she said. He still felt bad, however, but he felt proud that she would do that for him. "I feel like I'm more embarrassed at what I saw than you are."

"It was a shock to you, you had no idea. I knew it was there, so I was prepared for the idea that it could show up. I decided to risk it, you didn't. I thought of warning you, but then you would have insisted on not doing it, and I didn't want that. It really is important that you learn this. Now, let's continue, okay?"

His eyes widened. "Are you sure? Is there anything?"

She looked amused at his concern. "No, that was the only time. But when summer comes, we might have to think of something else; I'm hoping things will happen that will be too great a risk for you to see."

"We can use the Pensieve," he said. "We should have used it this time."

She raised her eyebrows. "That's true," she said. "I guess I've always thought of it as a way of seeing someone else's memories. I've never seen it used for the purpose of hiding a memory, so I didn't think of it."

"Snape did it last year. Before each session, he would take out a memory and put it in there. C'mon, let's go get it."

She looked impatient. "We don't need it now. You've already seen the memory, it would be pointless."

"But if we continue, I might see it again. This way, I won't."

Exasperated, she said, "Harry, think! It's in your memory now, you can see it any time you want to. Not that you'd want to especially, but you know what I mean. It's there. It would be an utterly pointless waste of time to spend ten or fifteen minutes every time we practice this just to hide a memory you already have. Don't you think?"

Again, he couldn't argue. "Yes, that makes sense."

"Also, let me ask you something," she continued. "You've practiced this with Professor Dumbledore, you trying to get into his mind, him not resisting. Did he put any memories into the Pensieve before you did that?"

"No, he didn't," Harry admitted.

"I didn't think so," she responded. "Why not? Because he loves you, respects you, and trusts you. He figures that if you see anything that might embarrass him, you'll be an adult about it, you won't respect him less, it'll be all right. Of course we all have our privacy, it's important. But Harry, this is a very intimate thing we're doing, you have to keep that in mind. I would only do it with someone I felt very, very close to. I think everyone has things, some down deep, that they wouldn't want anyone else seeing. By doing this with you, I basically said that I trust you with whatever's in there. If you want to respect that, you can do it by accepting that, and letting me be the judge of what I'll risk you seeing and what I won't. How about it?"

"Now I'm embarrassed, but for a different reason," he said. "I'm sorry, I probably just made this worse for you by acting this way. If you say it's all right, I should just accept that. At least one of us is acting like an adult."

She shook her head tolerantly. "You were shocked, Harry, it's understandable. It's all right now. Are you all right to continue?"

He nodded, wanting to be as mature about it as she was, and feeling he could barely manage. He tried to calm himself. She trusts you, he thought, she wants you to just accept it and move on. He focused on love, and soon he felt normal again.

"Okay, I'm ready. You should try to resist every time from now on." She closed her eyes, and said she was ready. They practiced for another twenty minutes, and he felt that it was very helpful; he was getting more and more familiar with what he needed to do. He recognized that only practice could help him improve, and it was definitely going to take more practice than he could do in the remaining time with Dumbledore. She was right, he needed her help.

After they finished, he said, "Hermione, I want to thank you... for doing this, and for the trust it shows you have in me. I didn't understand it properly when I asked you to do this, but I really appreciate it."

"You would do it for me, Harry," she said confidently. "In fact, in a way, you have. You've shown us stuff in the Pensieve that I think is more personal than what

you saw, just personal in a different way. You trusted me, you trusted us with that. You would risk whatever embarrassment you thought was necessary to help me. But I'm glad you appreciate it. Do you want to do this again tomorrow, after your lesson with Dumbledore?"

"Yes, thanks. I really feel like I'm making progress, and that'll help. By the way, I feel like I need to know... are you going to tell Neville about this? About what I saw?"

"I thought about that... I won't go out of my way to tell him, but if he asks, or it's a situation where I'd have to lie to avoid it, then I'll tell him, I wouldn't lie to him. I don't know how uncomfortable he'd be. Knowing the purpose, I think he'd understand why I risked it. He loves you too, you know. He'd be embarrassed, but he'd be all right. And that reminds me, you should feel free to tell Ginny. I don't want her saying 'how'd it go with Hermione?' and you saying 'fine' and her knowing from your eyes and your face that it wasn't fine."

"I hadn't thought about what I would tell her," he said. "I could just tell her it's something that would violate your privacy if I told her what it was. She'd accept that."

"That's true," she agreed, "But she's the one who set it up, I think she more or less knows what happened. By the way, I assume you never found out what Snape was hiding in the Pensieve last year, did you?"

Speaking of not lying, he thought... "Actually, I did. He got called out of the room, and I couldn't resist, and looked in. He came back and caught me, was furious, and told me not to come back. That was why I stopped taking Occlumency lessons last year."

Surprised, she looked like she was trying to rein in annoyance. "So, you lied to me last year! You said you'd gotten the basics down well enough! Why didn't you tell us?"

"It's because of what I saw," he admitted, the memory causing his mood to dampen. "You would have wanted to know what it was, and I really didn't want to tell you."

"Why not? Can you tell me now what it was?"

"I won't tell you the details, but they aren't important anyway. The gist of it is that it was a memory of when Snape was a fifth year at Hogwarts. It was an incident in which... my father and Sirius tormented him, humiliated him." He looked at her, still haunted by the memory. "My father acted like an arrogant jerk, like a bully. He was full of himself, and went after Snape for no good reason, just he felt like it. I had always been proud of him, of what people had told me about him. But I was ashamed after seeing that."

Compassion in her eyes, she said, "I'm sorry, Harry, that must have been really difficult. I can see why you didn't want to tell us. But I'm sure your father wasn't always like that, I've heard lots about how good he was, too. I'm sure those aren't just stories."

"I talked to Sirius and Remus in this fireplace soon after that, with the help of Fred and George's diversions. Sirius told me that yes, they were jerks, but they grew out of it, and that Snape gave as good as he got, which I believe. It made me feel a little better. But it also made me think of how Dumbledore is always so nice to everyone, even people who don't deserve it, always forgiving, feeling people can change when it seems unlikely. If I met someone like my father was then, I wouldn't give him the time of day, I'd write him off. But everyone says he became a really good person, so I'd have made a wrong judgment, kind of. It does make it seem that Dumbledore is right to feel like he does."

She put a hand on his shoulder. "Dumbledore is right about a lot of things," she said. "Come on, let's go back to Gryffindor Tower."

In the last week of June, Harry counted down the days with great trepidation. Summer had arrived, and so he knew that the events that the chess prophecy, as he had come to think of it, had referred to could happen at any time. He felt he had internalized the idea of Dumbledore leaving—he refused to use the word 'dying' in his mind, he told himself, because Dumbledore wanted Harry to think of him as 'elsewhere'—as much as he could, but he still knew he would be devastated when it happened. Like the Hogsmeade deaths, no amount of rational consideration could take away the pain he would feel.

Part of him wanted to talk about it with Hermione, ask her if she felt nervous too, but he didn't because he didn't want to make her think about it more than she had to. He didn't know if he would be a part of what happened, but she knew she would, and the idea had clearly scared her. He couldn't talk to the others, because he didn't want to tell them about the prophecy. He took emotional refuge in being with Ginny, talking to her in his hand at night. She lifted his spirits, and he hated to think of having to get through this time without her.

His Legilimency training was going even better; he could now enter his non-resisting training partner's mind at will. Dumbledore was now working with him on the hardest part of Legilimency: looking for memories and emotions that revealed lies without the person being any the wiser. It took a great deal of finesse, Harry was learning, and he wondered if he would ever manage it. Dumbledore assured him that he would eventually master it, which encouraged him to keep at it energetically.

In Thursday's lesson, in addition to the practice, Dumbledore gave him a short lecture on what he referred to as the etiquette of Legilimency. "When you know that someone is lying, you should not say or suggest that you know the person is lying. People lie all the time, about large things and small, and you would alienate everyone you knew in short order if you did so. Simply appear to accept what they say, though you need not act as if you believe the lie. Generally, it is also better to avoid mentioning that you are a Legilimens at all; you may want to avoid any mention of it in public or the press. As of now, only your friends know that you have studied it. People may behave uncomfortably around you if they know you have the skill."

"So," Harry mused, "that was why, at Malfoy's hearing last summer, he wasn't penalized for whatever lies he told in his testimony, even though you knew most of what he said were lies."

"Yes, of course. The purpose of Legilimency is not to catch people in lies, or expose their lies, but simply to inform you of them so you can react appropriately. A few of my friends on the Wizengamot knew that I was a Legilimens, but they knew that I would not reveal what I knew of Malfoy's, or anyone's, testimony that I knew to be untrue. While highly accurate, Legilimency is subjective, and cannot be used for such purposes. It is also best not to reveal the lies of others to anybody but your closest friends, and even then, only for good reason. Mastering Legilimency would allow one to become an excellent gossip, but obviously that would be a poor use of the skill. One must use considerable discretion.

"You must also be careful to avoid using it when dealing with Ginny in particular. Not that there is any special reason to think she would lie to you anyway, but it is common for married couples to lie to each other about small things, or convey lies of omission. Perhaps she might lie about something to avoid aggravating you or worrying you needlessly. For example, I assume you have not told her of the most recent prophecy. Since you suspect that you will be involved in whatever happens, if you told her, she would worry greatly until it happened. Partly for that reason, you do not tell her. If she were a Legilimens, and used her skill on you, she would know you were committing a lie of omission. Using it on your life partner simply causes too many complications. Sometimes you may find yourself doing so unconsciously, however; what is more important is that you not do it deliberately."

"Do you ever use it unconsciously?"

"Yes, quite often. Also, one can reach a point where, after sufficient practice spotting lies using Legilimency, one can spot them almost as well without the use of Legilimency. One comes to associate certain facial expressions, mannerisms, body movements, and so forth with dissembling. They range from subtle to obvious,

depending on the person. But, yes, one does reach the point where one detects lies using Legilimency without being consciously aware of it."

"Well, I hope I get to the point where I can do that," said Harry. "I know, you've said a few times that I will, and I do believe you. It just seems daunting at times, it's so difficult."

"That is very understandable, Harry. I myself did not master the skill until I was in my early twenties. I would have waited somewhat to teach it to you if I had more time. Fortunately, your now-formidable magical power makes it less difficult for you to master than it otherwise would be. Speaking of your power, I wished to ask how your lessons with your friends on the energy of love are proceeding."

"It's hard to say," said Harry. "Hermione and Neville especially say they feel like they're making progress, but it's hard to tell, of course. I guess we'll know if they start exhibiting unusually strong power or something. The Aurors will be keeping an eye on Neville on Saturdays, see if he starts changing in any way. But even if it's not helping their magic, they all like it and are happy to be doing it."

"Then that is an excellent end in itself," agreed Dumbledore. "We seem to be finished for the day, Harry, unless there is something else you would like to discuss."

"Not really... well, I was going to mention those dreams again, but I'm not sure there's more you could say. I'm still having them, not every night, but many nights. It's almost as though they're getting clearer, more focused. The message is stronger, more understandable, still the same one, that everything will be all right." Humorously, he added, "Sometimes I feel bad that if my spirit is going to all this trouble to reassure me, it isn't having the effect it should. You're still leaving, probably really soon now. Do you think it just means that in whatever confrontation there is, that will turn out all right?"

"That is certainly a possibility, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I would not be surprised if that were true, but again, it is impossible to know. No doubt retrospect will give you more information."

Harry nodded. "I guess it's nothing I should worry about. After all, in the dream, you keep telling me not to worry, it would be funny to worry about that. It's just unusual to have a dream that persistent, at least one that wasn't sent by Voldemort. Anyway, no, I don't think there was anything else. I'm looking forward to your lesson tomorrow."

The next day at lunch, Hermione reminded him that the O.W.L. re-test was that night. He nodded, amused, since she had reminded him of it for each of the last three nights as well. He had studied it the night before, but mainly so he could tell her he had, and partly because Ginny was studying it as well. Her O.W.L.s were coming up soon, though hers would all be next week, because the one-week break in

classes due to the Hogsmeade deaths meant that classes would continue into the first week of July. Hermione then started to quiz Neville on which stars were in which constellations, her tone suggesting that she wasn't convinced that he had studied enough. Harry and Ginny exchanged a glance, and Harry remembered their conversation in his office on the day of the last Quidditch match.

As they ate, Hermione asked Ginny if she was worried about her O.W.L.s. "No, not really," Ginny casually answered. "I have a feeling I'm not going to need them much." Hermione frowned slightly but didn't say anything; Ginny laughed. "I'm just teasing you, Hermione," she said. "I do take them seriously, but what I said is true, at the same time. I don't know what I'll do once I'm out of Hogwarts, exactly. Remember, Professor McGonagall wasn't exactly amused when I told her on Career Day that my career plan was to be Mrs. Harry Potter." Harry and Ron chuckled, remembering their laughter when she told them about that after it happened. Not every fifth year was brave enough to make jokes to McGonagall. "But you know Harry and I think we'll want a family, and that takes more than enough time. The question is how many kids; I don't know if I can manage what Mum did. Harry's not bothered about it, says that however many I think I can manage without going crazy is okay. So we'll see."

Harry looked up. "I don't think those were my exact words," he said, aware that she wasn't serious. "I don't know if we need seven, but I do want kids."

"I'm curious, Harry, why do you think you feel so strongly about it?" asked Neville. "I mean, I have no idea what I'll want."

"I'm not sure, but I think it has to do with my own childhood. I never got to have the kind of experiences and feelings before age eleven that most kids did. Christmas, birthdays, cold evenings around the fire, that sort of thing. I never felt the love and togetherness of a family, not until I spent time with the Weasleys. I want to be able to experience it from the parent's side if I couldn't as a child. I want to be part of a normal, loving family." Looking up at Ginny, he added, "I think I've made a good start on it already." She gave him a very happy look.

"Funny, when you say that, it makes me feel like I was lucky," said Ron, "but I never felt like I was when I was a kid. Not that I felt unlucky, except for the hand-me-downs, but I guess I took for granted the things you're talking about. They felt good at the time, but it never occurred to me that some people didn't have them. And Ginny felt hard put because she didn't have a sister." To her indignant look, he added, "Come on, how many times did I hear you say that you wished you had a sister? A lot, for sure."

"I just said that when I was mad at you," she retorted. "So, yes, a lot." The others chuckled. "Right now I feel like I want us to have four, two of each."

Preferably two boys first, then two girls, because girls mature faster than boys." She smirked at Ron, who rolled his eyes.

While she was talking, Pansy had sat down, having finished her lunch with the Slytherins. "What if you keep having boys, though? Are you going to do what the Weasleys did, just keep on going until you get a girl?"

"What makes you say that's what they did?" asked Ron defensively. Harry wondered if Ron was defensive because if that was what had happened, it meant that when he was born his parents had been hoping for a girl.

"No particular reason, Ron, that's just what it looks like," said Pansy. "Is it true? Did you ever ask your parents?"

"They just said that they wanted every child they got, and they were very happy about everything that happened," said Ginny. "In other words, they won't say. I guess I can understand why, though. I wouldn't want to say to my kids, I wanted this one but not that one, or I wanted something different than what happened. Mum did say once, 'All you want when it happens is for them to be healthy,' which I can believe."

"So, how did the conversation get around to what kids Harry and Ginny are going to have?" asked Pansy. Ginny explained, and Pansy said, "Yeah, I'm not sure what I'm going to do, either. Looks like the Mrs. Harry Potter job is taken."

"Yes, it was a highly sought-after position," agreed Ginny. "There's some danger, but it's very rewarding, not to mention, permanent." Harry smiled, happy to have made her so happy. I just wish there wasn't the danger, he thought.

After he finished eating, he decided to see Dumbledore quickly. He walked into the office to see Snape standing opposite Dumbledore's desk. "I'm sorry, sir, I can come back later, it isn't urgent."

"It is all right, Harry, go ahead," said Dumbledore.

"I was just going to mention that dream I had again, it was a little different last night. Maybe I'm dwelling on this too much, but it's pretty unusual, the whole set of them. Anyway, you were saying what you usually say, but there was more, I just couldn't hear it. Like a whisper, almost like the original message was at first. But there was another thing different about it; I saw a few faces, very vague... a man and a woman, and another man. I couldn't recognize them, except one. It was you," he said, looking at Snape, who looked startled. "At least I think it was you, it looked like you, but there was one difference. You were smiling, a warm smile. You looked really genuinely happy." Which was very strange, Harry did not add, though it was clear anyway.

"Very interesting, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Do you have any speculation on what it could mean, Severus?"

"No, Headmaster," said Snape stiffly. It was clear to Harry that he had made Snape uncomfortable; maybe it was reminding him that he never seemed happy, Harry thought.

"Well, perhaps you will in the near future," said Dumbledore. "Harry's dreams seem to be getting clearer as time goes on."

"Does that mean you think they're significant, sir?"

"It would not surprise me," responded Dumbledore. "Dreams can be significant in many ways. Even if their significance does not extend beyond you, they may still be considered significant. Still, I would not-"

There was a knock on the door, and McGonagall and a nervous Hermione walked in. "Professor Dumbledore, I have just received information that concerns Miss Granger." Turning to Hermione, she continued, "Your parents were involved in an auto accident on their way to work this morning. They are injured, but will recover."

McGonagall's last words didn't seem to soothe Hermione, who looked anguished. "This is because of me, I can't believe they did this," she lamented. Harry couldn't tell if the 'they' referred to her parents or not.

"I am very sorry, Hermione," said Dumbledore. "Normally, in a case such as this, it would be expected that you would go directly to the hospital to see them."

She slowly nodded. "I know, sir. I'll have to go back to my dormitory and change into Muggle clothes. Do you know which hospital it is, Professor?" she asked McGonagall.

"Wait a minute, should she really be doing this?" asked Harry. "I mean, what if this is..." He stopped, remembering the prophecy. "This is it, isn't it?" he asked, with a chilling realization. "The chess game? This was done to get you out of Hogwarts?" She nodded, looking very afraid and very determined.

"She must go, Harry," said Dumbledore. "She knows what must be done. But there is something you can do for her first. Hermione, take out your wand. Harry, please apply an Adhesion Charm." Harry did so, knowing he had been asked because his magical power had become so strong; only a stronger wizard than him would now be able to dislodge Hermione's wand from her hand against her will. It would only be a small help, though; she would still not have a chance against Death Eaters.

"I'm going with her," said Harry. "I'll make sure-"

"You can't go, Harry," Hermione said, looking like she wished he could. "I don't think it'll work right if you do. I have to go alone."

"But they're going to grab you!" he almost shouted. "They'll probably be waiting at the hospital!"

"Yes, Harry, they will," she said. "But remember, the rook isn't the one that gets sacrificed." She glanced at Dumbledore, her concern for him overtaking her

concern for her parents or herself. "I'll be all right. But remember what I said, the night we were with him." She took a step toward the door, then turned and quickly walked to Dumbledore and hugged him tightly, then just as quickly left, followed by McGonagall.

Harry looked at Dumbledore, his emotions churning. "I would ask you some questions, but I have a feeling you wouldn't answer them."

Dumbledore nodded. "I am sorry, Harry, but you must not know more than you do. I know it is very difficult, but there is nothing to do now. We must wait for events to transpire, and react to them. You may want to consider making efforts to calm and relax yourself. You may find it particularly useful."

Harry got the feeling that Dumbledore wanted to talk to Snape alone, but hadn't said so yet. "Yes, sir. I'll go back to my dormitory until it's time for your class to start."

He headed back to Gryffindor Tower, trying to calm himself. He still didn't know if he would be involved or not; what Dumbledore had said suggested to him that he would, but maybe it was just a good idea to be calm in general whether he was involved or not. He turned the last corner near the portrait hole, and saw Hermione, in a sweater, blouse, and pants, exit behind McGonagall. Impulsively, Harry ran up to her and hugged her. She hugged him back and kissed him on the cheek. "I'll be okay, Harry. I'll see you soon." She walked off after McGonagall toward the castle entrance.

Harry went into his dormitory, which was empty, and lay on his bed. Fawkes appeared and started singing, and he tried to focus on love. He could only think of Hermione at first, however. He tried to tell himself that it was all for a reason, that it would help defeat Voldemort. He just wished there was another way, one where this didn't have to happen, where Dumbledore didn't have to leave. He closed his eyes, concentrated on Fawkes' song, and focused on love again, more successfully this time.

He arrived in Dumbledore's class a few minutes before it started and took his usual seat behind Hermione, except that she wasn't there. Neville, who sat next to her at the front, turned to Harry. "Do you know what happened to her?" he asked. "McGonagall just asked her to come with her, and we haven't seen her since."

"Her parents were in a car accident," Harry said, trying to keep his greater concerns out of his voice. "They're going to be okay, though. She went to visit them in the hospital."

"That's too bad," said Neville, concerned. "I'm glad they'll be okay, though." Harry nodded, envying Neville his ignorance of the situation.

Dumbledore walked in, and conversation quieted, as usual. He explained to the class why Hermione was not there, then proceeded with a lecture. For the first time ever in Dumbledore's class, Harry found that he was having a hard time concentrating on what Dumbledore was saying. He tried to focus on Dumbledore, but his attention kept wavering. He can probably tell, Harry thought, and he'd forgive me, saying it was understandable.

A half-hour into the lecture, Harry found his attention drifting again. Suddenly, in his mind's eye, he could see the Department of Mysteries, the room with the Veil of Mystery. The image lasted less than a second, but he could clearly see Voldemort holding Hermione by what looked like the back of her neck, with Hermione in obvious pain and distress. At the same instant, pain flared in his scar, though nowhere near as strongly as it had at other times he had gotten such images. It was still rather painful, and he winced and bowed his head, touching his scar.

"What has happened, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, stepping over to him. Fawkes burst into view and started singing.

"I just got an image..." He couldn't help but glance at Neville apologetically before continuing. "Voldemort, in the room with the Veil of Mystery. He's got Hermione."

Harry could see startled glances from his classmates, and a horrified look on Neville's face; Ron looked shocked as well. "Was there anything else?" asked Dumbledore.

"Yes... the image was very quick, but I'm sure I saw one thing. He was making this gesture, like this," he said, demonstrating the gesture used to beckon someone. "I think it means he wants me to come, like he's going to kill her if I don't."

The class gasped, and Dumbledore nodded. "He wants both of us to come, Harry," he said. "You must go first. I must do a few things, and I will be along in a moment." Harry stood, nodding. He found that he was much less worried about facing Voldemort than he was about what would happen to Dumbledore. How could he lose to Voldemort, be killed by him? How would that help them?

Neville leaped to his feet. "I'm going, too," he insisted. Clearly he was not going to take no for an answer, but Harry knew he would have to.

"You can't go, Neville," said Harry sadly. "I'm sorry."

"You said that last year, but we came with you anyway," Neville argued, determination etched into his face. "I'm coming this time, too, Harry, I have to. I love her, I have to help."

"I am very sorry, Neville, but Voldemort wishes that Harry and I come, no one else," said Dumbledore, looking at Neville compassionately. "If you come, he will

simply kill you." Harry saw the class watching, entranced, with expressions ranging from alarmed to terrified.

"I don't care! I-"

"She would care, Neville!" shouted Harry. "She needs you, but to stay here, not to go get killed." Neville said nothing, but glared at Harry. Fawkes continued to sing.

Harry faced Dumbledore, tears coming to his eyes. "Sir, I-"

"Harry, you must focus on your task now," said Dumbledore. "Come from the same place you did in your dreams, and it will be all right. Do not worry about me. I am doing what I wish."

Harry focused, with great effort, and looked into Dumbledore's eyes. The love he saw there almost made him cry, and gave him strength, at the same time. Having totally forgotten that there was still a class there, Harry hugged Dumbledore. "I love you, Albus," he said.

"I love you too," answered Dumbledore, who broke the embrace, then kissed Harry's forehead. "An old wizarding custom, it will be explained to you later. I will be with you, but you must go now."

Fawkes was in the air, tail feathers sticking out. Harry looked confused. "I can Apparate there, he knows that."

"He thinks it best that you use him; you should not argue with him. He will be back for me, do not worry."

Harry nodded, grasping Fawkes's tail feathers. As he felt Fawkes start to lift off, out of the corner of his eye he saw Neville lunge for him, as Hermione had leaped on him when he had gone to aid Pansy. Ron, leaping to intercept Neville, was the last thing Harry saw before he and Fawkes disappeared.

Chapter 23

The Veil of Mystery

To Harry's surprise, he did not suddenly find himself face to face with Voldemort, or in the Department of Mysteries. Instead, he found himself outside, in a place he had never seen before. His first thought was that it was beautiful. The weather was sunny and warm, and he was standing in an area which was mostly grass but had some flowers, of many types. There were trees, but not so many that it felt like a forest, and even a stream. Harry felt that if there was such a place as the Garden of Eden, this was what it must have looked like. He then wondered what he was doing there.

Fawkes let out a short, sharp burst of song. To Harry's amazement, over the next two seconds, what had to be twenty or thirty phoenixes started appearing. Some were in trees, some were flying, a few were on the ground.

Fawkes started singing, and to Harry's further astonishment, all the others did as well. The sound Harry heard captivated him; he had never heard anything like it in his life, and was sure he never would again. The closest analogy he could think of to what he was hearing was a symphony; the phoenixes were combining to create one grand, complex song, as if each phoenix were a different piece of an orchestra. But the music was more than simply beautiful; it inspired Harry. In the classroom, he had wondered how he could possibly keep his focus on love, knowing what would happen to Dumbledore. Hearing the song, Harry sank deeply into the feeling of love. He knew he could do whatever he had to. Dumbledore would simply be elsewhere; he would be all right, his spirit was eternal. Harry remembered his dreams, suddenly feeling that they were more than he thought they were. Dumbledore would be all right, he knew.

The song ended after about thirty seconds, and Fawkes was in the air again, waiting for Harry to grab his tail. Harry took out his wand, ready for whatever was to come. Love was the only thing that mattered. He took hold of Fawkes's tail, and in a second they disappeared again.

He was suddenly in the room with the Veil of Mystery, which was ten feet in front of him. Off to the side, five feet away, stood Voldemort, holding Hermione in the same way Harry had seen in the image. He let go of Fawkes, who gave a very short burst of song, then disappeared. Harry still felt the bolstered courage and focus that he had received from the phoenixes. He didn't know what he would do; he just knew he had to keep his focus and trust his instincts.

"Welcome, Potter," said Voldemort. He was grinning smugly, trying to affect the manner of a gracious host, but not all that well, Harry thought. "So good of you to join us. I'm glad you received my invitation."

"Just barely," Harry replied, wand at the ready. "It was just a flash of an image, but I'll bet you were sending it at full strength. Thanks to Dumbledore, you're not getting into my mind anymore."

"Ah, yes, Dumbledore... you know, the invitation was extended to him as well... so, where is the Muggle-loving simpleton?"

Harry wasn't about to tell Voldemort that Dumbledore would be along soon; though he doubted it would matter, he didn't want to give Voldemort an extra chance to get ready. "He's no simpleton, as you well know," Harry said. "You wouldn't have invited him if he were. He's the only wizard you ever feared."

In the dreams in September, Voldemort had been enraged when Harry suggested that he feared Dumbledore; now he sounded amused. "I invited him because he has been a pest, nothing more. I admit he is powerful, but he is truly a fool, which will soon be demonstrated. With his magical ability, he could wield real power, but instead he chose to sit quietly at Hogwarts and never use it. I do not object; it has been to my benefit. Now, aren't you going to say hello to your friend?"

He glanced at Hermione, then quickly looked back at Voldemort. He knew that he could cause both of them harm by expressing concern for her fate. "I'd rather talk to you, Voldemort. I'm curious to know why you've chosen this place to come. It couldn't have been easy to get in here, not to mention that the Aurors should be here any minute."

"We will be undisturbed by Aurors, I have seen to that," replied Voldemort, still smug. "As for my reasons for coming here, they will be apparent soon enough. I hear you have quite a close relationship with Dumbledore, so it is fitting that he will die in the same way your godfather did. Perhaps after he does, you will want to join him, you can all be together again." He chuckled. "If there truly is anything beyond, which of course there is not. These mystics, they dabble in such foolishness, and Dumbledore is no less a fool for believing them."

For some reason this gave Harry a surge of hope; Voldemort's ignorance in certain areas was clearly to his detriment, and this might be one, he thought. He was considering whether to respond when Fawkes suddenly appeared, carrying Dumbledore, a few feet away from Voldemort. Dumbledore looked calm and focused, as Harry knew he would be.

"Ah, Dumbledore, there you are. Now, we-"

To Voldemort's apparent surprise, Dumbledore walked straight for him. Before Voldemort could raise his wand, Dumbledore had reached him, and grabbed Voldemort's wrist. He looked Voldemort in the eye, but said nothing.

Voldemort looked astonished, as if Dumbledore had done something totally nonsensical; Harry had to admit to himself that he couldn't see the point in it either. "Would you like to subdue me physically, Dumbledore?" asked Voldemort quietly. "Perhaps the Prophet was unknowingly right... you are quite old, it is true. Still, you may have wits enough to notice that I have a deadman's grip on the Mudblood here. If I release her involuntarily, she dies instantly. Perhaps you-" He stopped speaking and looked at Dumbledore with mounting anger.

"You dare to try to peer into my mind?" demanded Voldemort, outraged. "You should know better, Dumbledore, I am a better Occlumens and Legilimens than you have ever been. Now, if you wish her to remain unharmed, you will-"

Voldemort cut himself off yet again as Dumbledore again did something totally unexpected. He pointed his wand at the Veil; energy shot out of his wand and reached the curtain, seeming to stop there. Then in the same instant he released Voldemort's wrist, he flew through the air toward the Veil, as though being pulled by a powerful, invisible force. Harry saw a small, bright thread of energy leading from Voldemort's wrist to Dumbledore as he flew. In less than a second, Dumbledore reached the Veil, and went through. The thread lingered for a second, then vanished. Dumbledore was gone. Fawkes flew up high in the air and sang.

Part of Harry wanted to cry out in despair, and he was sure he would have if not for what Fawkes had done. But somehow, he was able to keep that grief out of his present thoughts. He did this on purpose, Harry thought, he must have a plan, there has to be a reason. In any case, he knew he still had to focus; he had to save Hermione, and himself.

Voldemort had a bewildered look, which turned into a truly evil grin, the most awful grin Harry had ever seen. "Well... I must say, my young friends, that was much easier than I had thought it was going to be. I thought I would have to persuade him to go through it, and here he simply does it on his own. Very convenient."

Keeping his grip on Hermione, Voldemort turned to Harry; as he did so, he turned a control on a pendant around his neck. Looking at Harry's forehead, he said, "Well, I see you were even closer to him than I thought. Did you tell him of the dream you had, the one involving the Legion of the Dead? I believe you did. I did not expect that he would believe only that, but I did plant other evidence to give the impression that I planned to call them into service. They do not exist, of course, but the idea was to play into Dumbledore's belief in mysticism and the afterlife. I knew that if I could persuade him that I intended to reach them, he would take measures to stop me, perhaps going so far as to do what he has done. I knew my plan would succeed when the phoenix chose you as its next companion, signaling that Dumbledore's end was near.

"You see, Potter, Dumbledore's death was futile, because of his beliefs. He gave up his life in this way because of what the phoenix did, but fate does not work that way. His end was not inevitable, he simply thought it was. Had he not decided to do what he has done, the phoenix would not have chosen you. He has confused cause and effect, and died for it. He has been led to believe that by doing what he has done, he can prevent my calling the so-called Legion into service, from the other side. There is no 'other side,' of course, but he believed there was. I never intended to get the help of entities that do not exist, so he has died for precisely nothing." He surveyed Harry though raised eyebrows and great satisfaction. "So what does Dumbledore's heir have to say about this turn of events?"

Still focused, Harry frowned. "What do you mean, his heir?"

Impatiently, Voldemort said, "He obviously kissed you on the forehead... I have been told that you are ignorant of much of wizarding customs. Here, allow me to be of assistance." He flicked his wand and a vaporous circle flew toward Harry; he raised his wand to defend against it, but it simply hung in midair, taking the shape of a circular mirror. Harry looked at it and saw on his forehead a bright purple dot, less than an inch in diameter, where Dumbledore had kissed him. He had no idea what it meant, and Voldemort obviously discerned as much.

"It seems that he should have told you, at least. Perhaps he was too busy trying to stop my nefarious plans," Voldemort sneered. Harry kept very focused on love, ignoring Voldemort's taunts. "That mark means that he has chosen you as his heir, not that it will do you any good. So, how do you feel?"

Harry felt an inclination to be as silent as he had with Malfoy, but realized that it was a different situation. He thought he might gain some useful insight if he engaged Voldemort in conversation, not to mention that his very state of not being intimidated was bound to annoy Voldemort. Also, he thought it best to keep Voldemort talking for as long as possible, so the Aurors had time to arrive. Harry didn't know how Voldemort and whoever else had gotten into such a secure area, but he had to believe that Aurors knew by now, and were trying to get past whatever was keeping them out.

"I'm sad that he's gone, but I don't believe you that it was for nothing. He was a brilliant man, and I think he had a reason for what he did, you just don't know it yet." He dearly hoped that was true; he hated to think that Voldemort had been correct in his gloating. He knew better than to take anything Voldemort said too seriously, though.

Voldemort chuckled. "It seems that you do not know it yet, either, in that case. Believe what you will, Potter, it is all irrelevant. He is dead, and his death has accomplished nothing. He is not coming back through that veil. Now, if you would hand over your wand."

A grim smile came to Harry's face. "That doesn't seem likely," he said.

"I am not surprised that you say that, of course," agreed Voldemort. "Let me put it to you this way. Give me your wand, or she dies."

This was exactly what Harry had feared most, because Hermione could not have been clearer about her wishes. He was not to sacrifice himself for her, and giving up his wand would be tantamount to doing just that. He looked at Hermione, whose eyes conveyed the same message: don't do it. The thought of it threatened his focus, almost made him despair. But Fawkes's song was still in the air, and it

reminded him of what he had to do. He had to stay alive, he was the one who could defeat Voldemort. He gathered all the courage he could muster, and looked at Voldemort. "No," he said simply.

Voldemort's eyebrows went high in surprise. "Do you doubt that I'll do it?"

"No, I don't," said Harry. "But I'm not giving you my wand. If you want to beat me, you'll have to do it in a fair fight."

Voldemort laughed. "A fair fight? What a stupid concept, Potter. Perhaps no one has mentioned to you that life is not fair. Still, I am impressed. I was advised that such a threat would coerce your cooperation. You apparently have more of a survival instinct than I thought. Well, perhaps I will not kill her just yet. I believe she may have useful information, and she would make a nice plaything for the young Malfoy. I'm sure she would amuse him greatly."

Here was extra motivation for Harry to get them out of there; he could imagine what Malfoy would do to a captive Hermione, and he knew he couldn't allow it. "I'm surprised that you would grant 'the young Malfoy' any favors," Harry said disdainfully. "I thought you didn't reward incompetence. He had any number of chances to kill me, and he failed every time."

Voldemort didn't seem bothered by Harry pointing this out. "True, and he has been... reprimanded for his failures. Still, he had not at that time been Cleansed. His failure was due to weaknesses he no longer has."

Harry tried to keep his confusion off his face. "Cleansed?"

"For Dumbledore's heir, you are quite ignorant, Potter. He should have explained more things to you. Cleansing is part of the initiation of becoming a Death Eater. One is relieved of one's weaknesses; it allows those I command to serve me better. In any case, your cooperation is not required. Avada Kedavra!"

The Killing Curse came at Harry, and his shield snapped on. The Curse was stopped; Harry was surprised that Voldemort had even tried it.

"Oh, no!" Voldemort cried in mock despair. "He has deflected my Killing Curse! However shall I kill him? Perhaps I should simply give up. What do you think, Potter?"

Harry was surprised; he wouldn't have guessed that Voldemort would use sarcasm. "I think you're saying that you can kill me in any number of ways that don't involve the Killing Curse. I never assumed anything else, you know." He tried to think of ways he could get his hands on Hermione; if he could get a decent grip on her, perhaps he could Disapparate them both out of there.

"It is good that you are under no illusions, then," smiled Voldemort. "Well, how about a duel? I hear your strength is improving. Perhaps you could be an entertaining opponent." Seeing Harry's raised eyebrows, Voldemort continued, "Oh, don't worry, I have procured another wand just for this occasion. After our encounter two years

ago at my rebirth, I discovered that your wand and mine are brothers; fate is odd that way. We cannot have that happening again."

Harry readied himself. Voldemort took out a wand and sent out the first spell, still holding Hermione in the same grip. Harry blocked it and responded, but within ten seconds he knew he had little chance of winning. What he expected was proving to be the case; he was at least Voldemort's equal in terms of power, but he simply had too little experience dueling. The bout continued, longer than it should have; Harry slowly understood that Voldemort was playing with him, like a cat with its prey. Voldemort could end the bout at any time. Harry took a more defensive posture, just hoping to stop anything that could kill or disable him. Voldemort seemed to become annoyed as he became aware of what Harry was doing. With a look of extreme boredom, Voldemort got by Harry's defenses; Harry was thrown five feet backwards. He scrambled to his feet.

"Surprising natural ability," said Voldemort clinically, "but of course, far too inexperienced to be any kind of worthy opponent. You would have made a good Dark wizard... except for your mental defects. If you were Cleansed, I doubt there would be anything left by the time it was done." Voldemort sounded very amused.

Where are the Aurors? Harry thought. He knew that his survival and Hermione's hinged on keeping Voldemort occupied, but he was sure they would have come by now. "That's okay, it sounds like something I wouldn't want any part of, anyway."

"Well, now, let us see what the young lady here has to tell us," said Voldemort, who still seemed in no hurry to do whatever he was going to do, if anything. Harry still couldn't understand how he could be so confident about having so much time. Fawkes was still circling, still singing. "Of course, we cannot have you helping her. I would like to see what cooperation we get from her under the Cruciatus Curse, but you could block it for her. So..." As he spoke, he was creating a shimmering curtain of energy that eventually stretched across the entire room, splitting it in half. As a test, Harry sent a Stunning Spell at it, and it bounced off. Harry was sure he could break through it with time; he just needed to figure out how.

Voldemort threw Hermione to the ground. "I have been told that you have information which I may find valuable," he said coldly. Harry blinked in surprise; he couldn't imagine what that would be. "Would you like to tell me what it is, or suffer a great deal?"

"There's no information I can give you that you would find useful," said Hermione. It looked to Harry as though she, too, was trying hard to focus, as they had practiced in their Saturday evening group.

Voldemort surveyed her silently as Harry tried different spells on the shield, trying to figure out a way past it. "You appear to be telling the truth," Voldemort said finally, sounding surprised. "I am not happy to have been misinformed. Still, you have proved useful, and-" He cut himself off, then grinned. "Ah, very clever, Dumbledore," he said to himself. "Not quite clever enough, though." He looked down at Hermione with an expression that suggested that she would pay for having tried to deceive him. "Your words are the literal truth, but I have found the lie of omission behind them. I see you have studied Occlumency as well, but are not yet sufficiently skilled. You do have the information I want, you simply cannot access it at this moment. Well, there are ways past Memory Charms... sadly, they tend to leave the subject in less than perfect condition, but your usefulness was at an end anyway. Crucio!"

Harry frantically accelerated his search for a way through the shield, and hit upon the idea of an energy beam that would try to drill a hole through the curtain of energy; he felt that the energy of love would defeat whatever Voldemort had done. But to Harry's shock, just after Voldemort said the word, a familiar energy shield snapped on around Hermione-and he knew he had not done it. She screamed in pain, but the shield held, and after a second she was obviously in no pain at all. She sat up and glared at Voldemort. Still trying to focus, Harry let out a silent shout of joy. He returned his attention to finding a way past Voldemort's shield; he visualized the energy beam and sent it out from his wand.

Voldemort looked quite angry; he had obviously not contemplated this. Whether out of anger or curiosity to see if she could stop it, Harry didn't know, as Voldemort said "Avada Kedavra!" The green shield immediately came on, and the bolt was stopped. Harry said a silent thanks for the Saturday evening sessions as his energy beam started to tear a hole through Voldemort's wall of energy. Hermione started to gasp for breath; he must be doing some Dark spell that leaves the person without oxygen, Harry thought quickly, and pointed his wand at Voldemort through the hole he'd opened. Voldemort hadn't noticed, and was blasted back a few feet, but kept his balance as the rest of his wall of energy dissipated. Furious, he fired off a few spells in quick succession, which Harry parried. Harry suddenly felt his body temperature rising, and realized that it was an area-effect spell of Voldemort's. He tried a few counter-spells, and finally found one that worked on the third try. He looked over and saw Hermione gasping for breath again, and fired at Voldemort, who this time was ready for him; Harry's spell had no effect.

"I believe I am about ready to stop toying with the two of you," said Voldemort in annoyance. "You cannot possibly defeat me, that must be clear to you. Oh, and the Aurors have not come, by the way, because of this, the rarest of magical artifacts," he said, pointing to what was around his neck. "This is the only one that exists; it is

essentially creating our own pocket of time. The outside world has stopped, or so it would seem to us. It does not last forever, perhaps two hours, but more than long enough to deal with you. Now, if-"

"You don't seem to be having much success so far," said Hermione scornfully. "Of course, you're pretty incompetent when it comes to dealing with Harry. How many times have you tried to kill him? Seven or eight, and that doesn't even count when he was a baby. He's got your number, Voldemort. You can kill me, but you'll never get him. He keeps coming up with new stuff every time you attack him, so you might want to give it up. Who knows what he might come up with next?"

Harry wondered what Hermione was doing, but then he realized that she was trying to anger him deliberately, hoping it would create an opening for Harry to do something. Predictably, Voldemort snarled and sent more spells at her; she warded some off, Harry tried to help, and he then put Voldemort on the defensive again.

"Stupid Mudblood! You have no idea what you are talking about!" sneered Voldemort in what was almost a shout. Harry had a sudden idea as Voldemort continued his tirade. "He is but a boy, and I can kill him any time I want, now. I would prefer him alive, to take him back and deal with him in a more leisurely manner, but you and he are becoming sufficiently annoying that-"

Harry had cast the Legilimens spell on Voldemort, and focused for all he was worth. Voldemort's anger had diminished his Occlumency skills, or perhaps he did not expect Harry to try such a thing, but Harry found his way in, and focused on bringing up memories of sadness, vulnerability, or weakness. Voldemort stopped talking just as Harry got the first image, of an eight-year-old Tom Riddle crying after having been screamed at by a worker at his orphanage. Next, Riddle was six, in tears after having a favorite toy taken away by older children.

Suddenly Voldemort turned on Harry, incandescent fury on his face. "You dare... you would even try..." he sputtered. "You will pay dearly for that, Potter."

Just as he turned, Hermione shot spells at him, which he warded off with half his attention. Harry took the opportunity to respond. "Why, because you used to be human? Are you ashamed of that? I've cried before, and I will again. It's part of being human. You just-"

Harry broke off as he gasped for breath, and at the same time felt a deep frost suddenly surround him. He struggled to find counter-spells, and managed to try two that were not effective before falling to his knees. Voldemort turned to Hermione, waved his wand... and suddenly collapsed. Harry staggered to his feet as Voldemort lay on the ground, unmoving.

Hermione quickly got up as well, as Harry said, "What in the world-"

"Harry, quick, we don't know how much time we'll have. Cast Legilimens on me. Dumbledore set the Memory Charm to release as soon as you got into my mind." Still wanting to ask questions but motivated by her urgency, he focused and did as she asked. He found his way in, and started to seek images of love, but before anything came up, she spoke. "Okay, that's done it, I remember now." She reached into her pants pocket and took out a small container of what looked like a gelatinous red substance. She put it down and, to Harry's shock, started to pull apart Voldemort's robes; soon, his chest was exposed. "Hermione, what-"

"Quiet, Harry, I have to concentrate. Be ready to Disapparate. If he so much as twitches, get us out of here." She opened the container, spilled some onto his chest, and to her obvious disgust, started rubbing it all over his torso, firmly and thoroughly. Harry noticed that Voldemort, skeletally thin at his rebirth, didn't seem to have gained much weight. She looked at Harry and said, "Harry, use an Absorption Charm, as powerful as you can make it. Focus on love, make sure that stays with him."

Again wanting to ask questions, but knowing he shouldn't right that minute, he did as she asked. He did the charm several times, focusing on different areas, until he was sure he had done as much as he could; he could not see the red substance anymore. "Okay, we can go now," she said, closing his robes around him as they had been.

"But he's unconscious," Harry pointed out. "Isn't there something we could do..."

"Like what, kill him?" she asked. "Neither of us can, Harry, this is what we were supposed to do. I'll explain later, but we don't know when he'll wake up, we have to go!"

"Okay, but shouldn't we deactivate that thing around his neck? Let time start running again in here, maybe the Aurors will get to him."

"All right," she said. She reached over and turned the device off. "Better yet, I'll take it." She unclasped it and quickly put it into her pants pocket. "Do you want to Disapparate us out of here, or use Fawkes?"

"Disapparate," he said. "Maybe it'll set off more alarms, get attention." He put his hands on her shoulders as the door that led to the room opened. Harry saw Lucius Malfoy and a few other familiar Death Eaters burst into the room. As they raised their wands, Harry visualized he and Hermione back in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.

They were suddenly there, standing in front of the class, which gaped at them in shock. Harry noticed that Professor McGonagall was now there. Neville raced forward and hugged Hermione tightly. Harry thought to tell the class what had happened to Dumbledore, but then saw how McGonagall was looking at him, especially

the purple mark on his forehead. He realized that was part of what the class was shocked by, that they must all know what it meant.

He suddenly wished that Ginny were there, and in the next second, Fawkes burst into view, carrying her. She looked at his forehead and, he could see, knew what had happened as well. She raced to hug him, and as he fell into her arms, the grief that he had put off finally came out. He started crying, and now he knew that it was in front of a class, but didn't care in the least. Dumbledore was gone.

He wasn't sure how long he cried, maybe two or three minutes, he thought. Ginny held him, spoke softly to him, comforted him. When Harry finally stopped enough to look up, the rest of the class had gone, except Ron; he assumed McGonagall had ushered them out, and Ron had probably refused to go. Neville still had a protective arm around Hermione; Harry could only imagine what a wrenching experience it had been for Neville. To the class, Harry had only been gone for about three minutes, because of Voldemort's time-stopping device, but it had to have been an agonizing three minutes.

He let go of Ginny, thanking her. Neville approached him. "Thank you, Harry, for bringing her back," he said earnestly.

"I'm not sure how much of it was me, Neville, but I did my best," he replied. Neville patted him on the shoulder.

McGonagall approached him. "Harry, I hate to do this right now, but delay is inadvisable. We must know what has happened, as soon as possible." Harry saw Snape appear in the room, with Fawkes, carrying the Pensieve. Harry made a silent request of Fawkes, who disappeared again.

"You can use my memories, Professor, they're the same as Harry's," volunteered Hermione. McGonagall nodded, and Snape set the Pensieve down. Fawkes returned to the room carrying Pansy, who took a look at Harry's forehead, and walked over to hug him. As he held her, he said to McGonagall, 'They're all coming. This happened to Hermione and I, they all have to know.'

Snape was obviously not happy. "There are operational details, Professor, which-

"I don't care, they're coming," Harry cut Snape off. Snape looked at McGonagall, who reluctantly nodded.

"I am agreeing, Harry, because this was such an experience that you could not be expected to avoid sharing it with those closest to you," she said. "But I expect that each of the six of you will speak of it to absolutely no one else, with the exception of what will be publicly known. This is extremely serious. Is that understood?"

Ron, Ginny, Pansy, and Neville all nodded, their expressions indicating they understood the seriousness of the situation. With her wand, McGonagall locked the classroom doors as Hermione put her memories into the Pensieve. Harry kissed Ginny on the forehead and held the back of her head.

Hermione finished, and they all put their fingers into the Pensieve. Harry saw himself suddenly appear in the room and let go of Fawkes. Neville tensed as he saw how Hermione was being held by Voldemort, and put an arm around her as Ginny put one around Harry.

Soon they saw Dumbledore appear, grab Voldemort's wrist, and appear to be pulled into the Veil. Harry stopped the images and asked, "All right, I'd really like to know why he did that."

Snape said, "Miss Granger, I see from your hands that you accomplished your task. How was the Dark Lord subdued?"

"He just collapsed," she replied. "No reason, we don't know why."

McGonagall turned to Harry. "That was Albus, Harry. He did that."

Harry gaped. "But he's..."

She looked at him meaningfully. "He is... elsewhere. This is what he intended, it was his plan all along. I did not see how it could work; I know little about mysticism. But while he was not certain, he was confident. He did research, he consulted many mystics from all over the world. The information they gave him suggested this plan to him. He is not a ghost; he is now not what we would call alive, but it is clear that he exists, in some way we do not understand.

"You saw him touch Voldemort; that was an essential part of what he knew he had to do. His aim was to create a link with Voldemort, and he used the Veil to do it. You saw that thread of energy that followed him into the Veil; that was the link he sought. He used Legilimency on Voldemort to try to deepen that link. Whatever he has done-and I do not pretend to understand how it works-has allowed him to, from wherever the Veil takes people, maintain a link with Voldemort. I do not know the extent or form of this link, but it explains Voldemort's collapse at the end. Professor Dumbledore has achieved what he set out to do." Harry thought he heard awe in her tone.

Harry looked at his friends, who were clearly awed as well. "Hermione, did you have any idea...?"

She shook her head. "No, Harry. I'm sure he thought it was too risky for me to know as well. All I knew was that I would hopefully get a chance to do what I did, I didn't know how it would happen."

"Did the prophecy give him the idea to do this?" Harry asked McGonagall.

"Not as such," she replied. "He had been considering the vague outlines of such a plan already. When he received the prophecy, he decided that it meant that such a thing could succeed, and pursued it more energetically. I confess I attempted to dissuade him."

Harry realized that he hadn't thought about the fact that she would be as pained by Dumbledore's death as he was. "I would have too," he said. "Does this mean that he can knock out Voldemort any time he wants? What else can he do?"

"We do not know, Harry," she replied. "Only time will tell. We do not even know for certain that he can do it more than this once. This is all very new territory."

There was silence for a moment, and Harry resumed the flow of the memory. They watched Voldemort's smug satisfaction at Dumbledore's death. After Voldemort had finished gloating, Harry stopped the images again. "How was Voldemort persuaded to come here, anyway? How was it arranged that he thought that he could try to get Dumbledore to go through the Veil voluntarily? He really thought Dumbledore believed the stuff about the Legion of the Dead?"

"There are many details on that matter, Professor, that you and your friends do not need to know," said Snape. "Suffice it to say that the headmaster devised a plan to persuade the Dark Lord that his plan to deceive the headmaster would be successful. The headmaster was able to create a false image of a prophecy, one whose wording was deliberately vague, but intended to encourage the Dark Lord in his plans. I presented this prophecy to the Dark Lord, telling him I had managed to steal the memory from the headmaster's Pensieve." He surveyed Harry's friends. "I believe that most of you had already deduced that I am serving as a spy against the Dark Lord. Release of this information could gravely damage our cause and have enormous ramifications."

They nodded earnestly. "I think we pretty much knew that already," said Ron.

"The headmaster's final act served as confirmation to the Dark Lord that his interpretation of this false prophecy was correct, and that the headmaster's was incorrect, as you just saw. Fawkes's choosing of you, Professor, fortuitously added to the Dark Lord's confidence that his plan would work." Snape resumed the images.

Soon Voldemort was threatening to kill Hermione if Harry did not surrender his wand; Harry and Hermione exchanged a worried glance, as they knew what effect seeing it would have on Neville. When Harry's image said "No," Neville looked at Harry, eyes wide, horrified. Hermione stopped the images and turned to Neville.

"Listen to me, Neville," she said. "I pleaded with Harry to do that. He didn't want to, you know him well enough to know that. You also know that he can't die, or else we're all in serious trouble. Giving up his wand would be giving up his life in that situation, not to mention that I would have died anyway. Voldemort wasn't just going

to let me go if Harry gave up his wand. You were ready to give up your life for him, and you would again. We all have to be ready to do that. You would have done the same thing in my position, you would have pleaded with him to do what he did." Neville took this in, and slowly nodded.

Harry said, "Neville, believe me when I say that that was the hardest thing I've ever done. I almost couldn't, because I believed that he would do it. It was agonizing. But I knew what she wanted, and what was at stake. I just made myself do it."

"I know, Harry. I'm sorry. It was just... a shock. But I realize that you saved her life by doing it, and I can imagine how hard it must have been." He patted Harry on the shoulder, and Hermione continued the images. Neville looked predictably furious about Voldemort's mention of giving Hermione to Malfoy. Harry heard her say softly to Neville, "That's never going to happen, Neville. Harry and Dumbledore made sure of that."

When Voldemort mentioned Cleansing Malfoy, Harry looked at Snape questioningly. Snape subtly shook his head and gave him a look, which Harry understood as a request not to seek further information, at least not there and then.

The next part of the scene that provoked a strong reaction was when Hermione was able to use Harry's new spells. Everyone except Harry and Snape gaped at Hermione; Harry grinned broadly for the first time since Dumbledore had died. "I was so happy when I saw that... well, you can imagine."

"Thank you," she said happily. "I didn't have a chance to reflect on it at the time, but I'm excited because it means the Saturday evenings worked, and probably will for everyone else, with time. Probably it just happened with me soonest because I was tested like this. You know what this could mean."

"You mean, that it is not just him and Albus," McGonagall clarified, and Hermione nodded. "Indeed, there are wide-ranging implications, which we shall discuss later. But we should continue with this for now." She started the images again, and Harry saw Neville put his arm back around her and look at her proudly. "You'll be doing it soon too," she whispered.

The others gaped again when Hermione started insulting Voldemort, but no one stopped the images. "A worthwhile effort," commented Snape.

Then as Voldemort was angrily responding to Hermione, Harry was doing the Legilimens spell, and as Voldemort turned on him in fury, Harry stopped the images. He explained to the others what he had done, and described the images he had received. This got more amazed looks, and Snape said, "If any of the Dark Lord's followers tried such a thing, they would be dead in the next few seconds. He is very sensitive to any intrusion into his mind. It is remarkable that you are still here."

"I wouldn't be, if not for Albus," Harry replied. "As you're about to see, we were fighting a losing battle."

The images continued, and Harry saw he and Hermione start to be overcome, when Voldemort collapsed. Harry and Hermione's friends watched, fascinated, as he removed her Memory Charm, and repulsed when she spread the red substance over his torso. "I wouldn't mind leaving that in the Pensieve," she muttered. "That was so disgusting... he even feels evil."

Harry turned to Hermione. "Why didn't we try to do anything else? Maybe we couldn't kill him, but couldn't we have tried to capture him? He was unconscious, after all."

McGonagall answered before Hermione could. "The headmaster's instructions to Miss Granger were very specific: she was to apply the substance to Voldemort as quickly as possible, then leave immediately. Professor Dumbledore could not know how long Voldemort would remain unconscious, and there exist highly advanced magical defenses against being involuntarily transported elsewhere. Had you tried, you could have been killed, or ended up somewhere you did not intend, and captured."

"Wouldn't it have been worth the risk, though?" Harry wondered. "I mean, he was unconscious, who knows the next time we might get a chance like that."

"For what it is worth, Professor, I felt as you do," said Snape; Harry felt from Snape's tone that Snape had had a few arguments with Dumbledore about the topic. "I felt that the chances that the Dark Lord would anticipate being rendered unconscious and involuntarily transported away were remote, and so he would not have prepared any such defenses. The headmaster, however, chose to act with extreme caution; he took very literally the words of the most recent prophecy, that you could 'later' defeat the Dark Lord. He felt that to attempt to do so now would invite disaster."

As they spoke, the scene reached the end, and they all left the Pensieve. McGonagall faced Harry and Hermione. "You both performed with exceptional skill and bravery," she said, "under extraordinarily trying circumstances. I am very proud of you... as I am sure Albus would be." She smiled a bit, then added, "Perhaps I should say, 'is.' This business still confuses me."

"I will make an announcement during dinner tonight, though the whole school will know before then what has happened, because of the mark he left on Harry. Professor Snape and I will confer to discuss exactly what elements of this to make public knowledge. For now, you should convey to those who ask that Professor Dumbledore saved your lives by sacrificing his, which is not untruthful, and that was what allowed you to escape. You should avoid providing even minor details so as not to risk compromising secrecy regarding what was done." She stopped talking and was

preparing to leave, then looked at Harry and said, "Harry... that Pensieve is now yours, along with everything else that was Albus's. We will meet sometime in the next week to discuss the matter." She and Snape left the room.

Before Harry could ask, Neville did. "What was that red stuff, Hermione? Why did you have to do that?"

Hermione took a deep breath, as if getting ready to tell a long story. "It's something I've been working on all year, something top-secret. I wasn't allowed to tell anybody; for a lot of the time, even Snape didn't know. I got this idea from Helen Clark, one of Harry's Slytherin firsts. When she saw the Marauder's Map at the beginning of the year, she said, 'It's too bad you can't use a map like this to find Voldemort.' I started wondering if it was possible. I spent some time researching it, and I thought it could be done. I talked to Dumbledore, and he encouraged me, making sure I had all the materials and books I needed. He also secretly escorted me out of Hogwarts a few times, introducing me to some magical chemists and researchers. I studied less than usual this year, also. You noticed that I wasn't raising my hand all the time."

"We just thought you were tired of being made fun of," said Ron.

She chuckled. "That, too," she admitted. "Anyway, the more I studied it, the more I thought it could be done, and in April, it finally worked. I, and the outside people I was working with, managed to create a rather large map of England, which was similar to the ones I made for you. If the red stuff is absorbed into a person's skin, they become visible on the map. It doesn't even work for all of England yet; little magical relays have to be set up every few miles or so for it to work, so it's going to take some effort to cover the whole country. But we did tests, and it worked on the researchers and I. Kingsley was told after the first successful test, and he was thrilled at the idea, but of course the hard part was going to be figuring out how to get it onto Voldemort. Now that we have, once we get the relays set up, wherever he is in England, we'll be able to know where he is. I don't know how long it's going to take."

The others looked very impressed. "So, you put him in check," Harry said. She nodded and told the others about the chess prophecy.

Neville looked wounded. "Why didn't you tell me?" he asked Hermione.

"She did it to save you worry, Neville," said Harry. "There would have been nothing you could have done, and you would have agonized over it. I mean, she's not my special person, and I worried a lot about her for the past month. I didn't tell Ginny, even though I didn't know for sure that I was going to be involved. I thought I probably would be-I've gotten used to the idea that things always happen to me, especially when they involve Voldemort-but I couldn't be sure. I'm sorry," he said,

now looking at Ginny, "I know you would have wanted to know, but I didn't see the point in telling you."

"The point," she said, "is that I want to share your life with you, both the good things and the bad. I know that this is a part of being Harry Potter's special person. I don't feel like I'm really with you if I don't share stuff like that. I forgive you, because I know your heart was in the right place. I can see your point. But I think we're going to have to have a talk about this, reach an understanding." He nodded and took her hand. He could see her point, too.

Neville reached over and put his arm around Hermione's shoulder, moving her head to rest against his. "I was so terrified, when Harry told us about that vision. I thought for sure I was never going to see you again. It... made me realize, more than I ever had before, how important you are to me. I don't ever want to lose you."

"You won't, Neville," she assured him. "I love you, I'm not going anywhere."

"I love you, too," he said. "You were only gone for a few minutes, to us, but it seemed like much longer to me. All kinds of things went through my mind. One of them was that I wished we'd had the Joining of Hands done. I would have been able to look at you, know if you were all right or not. I would have sat there and stared at my hand."

She looked at him uncertainly. "Are you saying that you thought then that you wanted it done, or..." She didn't want to finish the sentence.

He looked at her very earnestly. "At that moment, it was what I thought I wanted. Now, looking at you... I know it's what I want. I want to do this with you, if you want to."

She smiled. "Yes, Neville, I want to. I've wanted to since they had it done, I just didn't want to pressure you." They kissed; Harry and the others exchanged smiles.

"Nothing like almost losing someone you love to make you realize how much you love them," said Ginny. "It's too bad Dumbledore's gone, he could have done it for you."

"We couldn't have yet, anyway, since neither of us is seventeen," pointed out Hermione. "Who knows if Neville's grandmother or my parents would consent. It's probably better if we wait until we're both seventeen. But yes, it is true that it's best if the strongest possible wizard does it." She and Neville glanced at each other, and they both looked straight at Harry.

He took a few seconds to catch their drift. "Me?" he asked, surprised. "But I don't know how to do it!"

Neville regarded Harry imperiously. "Learn," he said. Harry smiled and snapped off a salute. Neville smiled back.

Ginny looked thoughtful. "I'm curious, Harry, if I'd known what was going on, would you have wanted me looking, or would you rather I wasn't, so you could focus better?"

He thought about it. "It's almost hard to say, really. I'd want you to be able to look, but the tingling would remind me that you were looking. It might not threaten my focus, but in that kind of situation, you know you could die. You try not to think about it, because it would be too distracting. But now I have another reason not to want to die, an even stronger one. I don't want to have to leave you. So your watching me could remind me of that, and I could worry and lose my focus."

"That makes sense," she said. "I guess I won't in the future, then, much as I'll want to. I'm not naive enough to think this won't happen again."

"Not until Voldemort's gone," Harry agreed. "But it's still hard to imagine how that's going to happen. I mean, we accomplished a lot today. He'll be able to be tracked, at some point, and it may be that Dumbledore can do more to Voldemort from wherever he is now. But I'm supposed to be the one with the power to 'vanquish' him, and I have no idea how I'm going to do it. He's still way too strong for me, too experienced. Those were awful spells he was hitting me with, he could have done away with me any time he wanted. Like he said, he wanted us alive, that's the only reason he didn't kill us. It never occurred to him that he was in any danger, that there was any chance he'd be stopped before he could kill us."

"That makes me wonder," said Ron, "How did Dumbledore do that, if time was stopped to everyone outside the room? How could he have picked the right time?"

"We may never know, Ron," answered Harry, "but he did tell Ginny and I once at dinner that in the... nonphysical world,... no wait, realm, he said, that time doesn't work the same way, or there's no such thing as time. Maybe from where he is, he can choose any point in time he wants. It's really, really strange."

"Hermione, it's so fantastic about the spells of Harry's you did," enthused Pansy. "We definitely have to keep up the Saturday sessions in the summer, maybe do more of them. Thank goodness Harry had the idea to do them."

"Yes, it feels really good," Hermione agreed. "I'm sure that Dumbledore is very proud, wherever he is. I know he wanted this to happen. You might be teaching your classes very differently next year, Harry."

"It does look like I might be," he agreed. "I'll have to think more about it, talk about it with McGonagall. By the way, I noticed that you used the spells without an incantation either, even though your score on that meter wasn't 100."

"I have a theory. I think if I were tested now, it would be 100; I think that anyone who uses the energy of love successfully is going to score 100 and not need

incantations. I also think that's why your spells didn't come with incantations; they weren't necessary. You can only do them by using the energy of love."

"Sounds like a reasonable theory," he said. "Given what happened, I think the Aurors might be interested in you coming along for some part of the time for the next session. By the way, Neville, what are we going to do about tomorrow?"

"You mean, are we going to see the Aurors? I don't know... I'm okay to, it should really be you that decides. You should also talk to Kingsley, they might want to wait. A lot of them are close to Dumbledore."

Harry nodded. "Okay, I'll talk to him soon, see what he thinks. I think maybe we'll do it on Sunday. I still want to do it, it may just be better to wait a day, until the shock wears off a little more. Funny, I say shock, but I had almost six weeks' warning for this, and it was still a shock. I can only imagine if I hadn't known about it in advance. There's no way I could have not fallen apart when it happened, then Voldemort would have had me."

They spent the next two hours talking more, covering all aspects of what happened. Harry felt that it was not so much that they needed to talk, but that they needed each other, each other's company and support, in what was a difficult time for all of them, for all had cared about Dumbledore. He thought it could be likened to a support group, or a wake, then he realized that they were almost the same thing. He had never felt closer to his friends than he did then.

When they finally left the room, it was five o'clock. Ron, Ginny, and Neville decided to go back to Gryffindor Tower, while Harry and Hermione went to see Hagrid. Hagrid had heard, of course, and burst into tears again at seeing the purple mark on Harry's forehead. He calmed down, and apologized. "Bin grievin' the whole year, don' know why it should seem like such a shock now." They talked for a half hour, exchanging stories and memories.

On their way back to the castle, near the castle steps they ran into Cho and Marietta. Cho looked at Harry with pity, and hugged him. "I'm so sorry, Harry," she said. "But I'm so glad you're alive, the Hufflepuff sixth years told us what happened. I would have been so scared. But this is you, I would have known you wouldn't be." She released him, looking at him proudly.

"I was scared, just not for myself," he said, glancing at Hermione.

Marietta walked up to him. "I'm sorry too. He was really good to me, when he had no reason to be. I'll never forget how he was, at the feast."

He nodded. "I learned a lot from him. Especially that night." To his own surprise, he impulsively stepped forward and hugged her. He could feel that she was startled, but after a second, returned the hug. "Thank you," she said, her voice full

of emotion. Harry realized that she was thanking him because he was truly forgiving her, as he had not the night of the feast, not in his heart of hearts.

Back in Gryffindor Tower, Harry relaxed on his bed until dinner, Fawkes singing to him. The thought that he would be spending more time in Fawkes' presence was both uplifting and depressing at the same time. He asked Fawkes to rest on his chest, petted him, and talked to him about Dumbledore. He got the feeling that Fawkes was sad, too. He wondered whether he was imagining it, or whether he was becoming more attuned to Fawkes' nonverbal communication.

Dinner was somber; the Great Hall was much more quiet than usual. Harry and his friends talked, but not as much as usual; they had already said much of what they could say in their long talk earlier. At one point all ten Slytherin first years came over to give Harry their condolences. "Pansy told us she saw what happened, how brave both of you were," Helen said to Harry and Hermione. Harry talked to them for a few minutes, then they went back to their table.

At six-thirty, McGonagall walked into the Great Hall and up to the podium; Harry noticed that most all of the teachers had taken their seats at the teachers' table. "It is my very painful duty to report to you the death this afternoon of Albus Dumbledore, the school's headmaster." Where once there would have been a gasp there was dead silence, as everyone already knew. "There was a confrontation with Voldemort in the room at the Department of Mysteries containing the artifact known as the Veil of Mystery. Voldemort provoked the confrontation by having his Death Eaters abduct Gryffindor sixth year student Hermione Granger, who he then took to that room. He demanded the arrival of the headmaster and Professor Harry Potter, who both soon arrived on the scene. Miss Granger was involved in a plan to achieve a strategic advantage in the struggle against Voldemort. Due to the headmaster's sacrifice, the operation was a success. We cannot give details, for reasons of security, but I can say that we have significantly improved our position in this struggle as a result of today's events.

"The headmaster's actions achieved not only this purpose, but also saved the lives of Miss Granger and Professor Potter. Professor Potter managed to keep Voldemort distracted for the time necessary, fighting off spells that would have killed most wizards. Miss Granger, in addition to assisting with the strategic operation which occurred, was able to fight off Voldemort's Cruciatus Curse and Killing Curse by using the shields discovered by Professor Potter; she is the first person other than Professor Potter or the headmaster who has demonstrated the ability to use them." There was a moderate gasp at that, and many heads swiveled in Hermione's direction.

"The headmaster himself knew throughout this year that his remaining time was short; his phoenix Fawkes' choosing of Professor Potter as his next companion signaled that he would not live more than another year. Phoenixes do not choose new companions until the death of the older one is near. The headmaster used this information to devise a plan to put his death to the best use possible, and it has succeeded. He had no regrets.

"I worked with Albus Dumbledore for forty years. He was not only an excellent headmaster, but also a kind man and a good friend. I shall miss him greatly, as shall we all. Thank you."

Harry and his friends exchanged looks. "I'm a little surprised she even said that much," said Hermione. "I guess the idea was that it was all right to say anything that Voldemort and his people already know."

"Hermione," Harry said, "you still have that thing you took off of Voldemort, don't you?"

She nodded. "I was surprised, too. I thought she or Snape would take it from me. Maybe they think we'll need it."

"Sounds reasonable, considering what you guys get yourselves into," said Pansy.

"You're in it too, now, don't forget," said Ron humorously. "You save Harry's life, you're in the group."

"What about Justin?" she asked.

Ron paused, then said, "You save Harry's life twice, you're in the group." The others chuckled.

"What about me, Ron?" asked Neville. "I've only done it once."

The others looked at Ron, amused, as he thought. Finally, he said, "You go running into a room, totally outnumbered, to try to save Harry..." Ron joined in the laughter that followed. "Don't give me a hard time, Neville."

Neville reached for Hermione's hand. "I learned from the best." Ron shook his head and reached for his goblet.

A voice behind him said, "Is Neville really giving you a hard time, Ron? People do change, don't they?"

Harry looked behind him to see Hugo Brantell. "Hi, Hugo. Not too hard to figure out why you're here. Have a seat." Hermione moved toward Harry, and Hugo squeezed in on her left.

"How are you doing, Harry?" asked Hugo, concerned.

Harry thought about it. "I've had all this time to prepare for it, so it's not the shock it would have been otherwise. I'm really sad, of course, I'll miss him terribly. I feel like... I wish so much I could have had another five years with him, but if that had happened, they would have been over just like that, and I would have wanted

another five. I guess these things happen when they happen, no matter what we want. But I am reassured that he was sure that his spirit would survive, and... not that anyone could keep anything secret from you anyway, but how much do you know about this that's not going to be public?"

"All of it," he replied. "McGonagall showed me Hermione's memory." Seeing their raised eyebrows, he added, "Dumbledore confided in me about that kind of thing, too, since it would be hard to keep secrets from me anyway. They know I can be trusted. Anyway, you two were really impressive. And Dumbledore... I'll tell you, Harry, you wanted another five years with him, but my feeling is, at least you got this year. I wish I could have had that. You just can't say enough about him to do him justice."

"That's for sure," Harry agreed. "And you're right, I do cherish this year. The best thing about being a professor was that I got a chance to spend much more time with him. Anyway, I was saying that what happened at the end of what you saw not only saved our lives, but was reassuring. He's there, somewhere. He may not be coming back, but unless Voldemort suffered some kind of fit purely by coincidence, what we saw was proof that he's still around, in some way we don't understand. At least I don't understand it. So I feel better for him, but I'm still really sad for myself."

Hugo nodded. "And how about you, Neville? You had a pretty tough day, too."

Looking surprised to be asked, Neville thought for a few seconds. "It was a pretty tough three minutes; the rest wasn't so bad. I realized a few things I hadn't known," he said, looking at Hermione.

"Why aren't there all these Ministry people around, Hugo?" she asked. "I'd have thought they'd all come rushing down here, wanting to express their official sympathy and all that."

"Some wanted to, but McGonagall said no," said Hugo. "There's going to be a ceremony tomorrow to honor him. She said they could come then, that now is too soon."

"Good for her," agreed Hermione. "The last thing you want to do when you're grieving is be polite to a bunch of politicians. I'm afraid you're going to have to talk to them, though, Harry. You can't really avoid it. I suppose you could try to honor his memory by dealing with them like he would have."

"Couldn't I honor his memory while hiding in my dormitory, listening to Fawkes sing, and talking to Ginny in my hand?" joked Harry.

"I'm sure he wouldn't mind, anyway," said Hugo. "Well, I'm sorry, Harry, but I do need to ask you a few questions for the article. You, too, Hermione. Is here okay, or would you like to go somewhere else?"

"The usual place, I think," said Harry. "The rest of you want to come? They nodded and got up. As they walked out, Hugo said, "I'm going to want a picture of you two, also. People are going to want to see that mark."

"Just what I need, more people looking at my forehead," Harry said with resignation as they walked out.

After the interview, Harry's friends headed back to their common rooms, but he had one thing he wanted to do before going back.. Looking at his map, he found that McGonagall was in her living quarters. He knocked on her door, which opened. She got up from a chair. "Harry! Come in. What can I do for you?"

"Nothing especially, Professor. I just wanted to come by to see how you were doing. Everybody's been making a big fuss over me, because of this," he said, gesturing to the purple mark, "but this had to be really hard for you, worse than me. I know you and he were really close."

She looked touched by his concern. "Thank you, that's very thoughtful. Yes, I..." She trailed off, looking like she was trying to avoid being overcome by emotion. After a few seconds of trying to regain control, she said, "Oh, to hell with it," and stepped forward to hug Harry. He felt as though they were both pouring their emotions into the embrace, holding each other as they would like to be holding Dumbledore. She sobbed for a few seconds, then sniffled and let go of him. "I really have not had a chance to grieve, Harry," she said, her voice still heavy with emotion. "I had all year, of course, but not today. We had to find out what had happened, then consider the strategic ramifications, talk to the Aurors, by which time people were starting to call. I just came back to my quarters for a rest, I may have more things to deal with later.

"You know, after you came back from that confrontation, and you cried on Ginny as you did... I envied you. I wanted to cry, just as you were. But I could not, right then." She chuckled and sobbed at the same time. "Albus would tell me that I should go ahead and do so now, I am sure. The fact is, it's almost difficult to do, there is such a reflex to suppress it. The last time I did was sixteen years ago..." She started to sob again, as Harry recalled what she had said on that December morning when she took him to Hogsmeade to meet Cassandra. He reached out and held her again. Feeling her cry brought more tears to his eyes, which he didn't fight. They stood there for another minute, silent, each crying at times. She stepped back, looking at him fondly. "Thank you, Harry, I needed that."

"It's no problem, Professor. I-"

"Minerva," she corrected.

He smiled, touched by her gesture. "It's no problem, Minerva." He chuckled; to her questioning look, he explained, "I just thought, if I told Hermione this, she'd swoon. She'd love to be able to call you Minerva."

McGonagall laughed. "Hermione is sweet. Very few students would admire me as she does; most would be too intimidated, or simply would not see me as any kind of role model."

"Well, I suppose more may from now on," he said. "I assume you're going to be the headmistress now?"

She nodded, shrugging as though it weren't important. "Albus arranged it with the governors before he left. I suppose I shall have to cultivate a different image now; being strict may be a good quality in a deputy headmistress, but not a headmistress. Perhaps I should practice smiling over the summer."

"Somehow I think you'll manage," Harry said, smiling.

"By the way, Harry, I wanted to be the one to tell you... the new deputy headmaster will be Professor Snape." She took in his surprised look, and said with amusement, "Either you are not as surprised as I thought you would be, or you are better at hiding your feelings than you used to be."

"Maybe it's a little of both," he said. "I guess I always remember what you said at the beginning of the year, about not criticizing fellow teachers. I mean, well... whatever I said wouldn't be anything you don't already know anyway, I would think."

She nodded. "You do not think he has the qualities that a deputy headmaster or a headmaster should have," she guessed. "I know this, Harry. So did Albus, and so does Professor Snape. He does not particularly welcome the appointment; he has no interest in the position. Professor Dumbledore assured him that he could resign the position after Voldemort has been dealt with. The reason for giving him the position is to increase his value to Voldemort."

Understanding dawned on Harry. "Ah, I see. There would be more chances to give him false information."

"Or even true information, yes, with higher credibility," she said. "Sometimes it is necessary for us to provide Voldemort with information which is of genuine help to him. If Professor Snape were of no help to Voldemort, he would not be so valuable to him, and therefore to us. I am sure you understand that." Harry nodded. "In fact, that reminds me of something, and now is as good a time as any. Harry, would you use your new dog to summon Hermione?"

Harry did so. "You don't have one?" he wondered.

She shrugged. "I never bothered to try; it is not as though I need to summon people all that often. Also, I found the spell somewhat... whimsical, more suited to his personality than mine."

Harry decided he felt comfortable enough to make a joke. "Maybe yours could be an owl. It could fly to the person, land on their shoulder, and look at them like this," he said, adopting an expression that suggested that someone had done something wrong. "Hedwig's looked at me like that more than a few times," he added as she laughed.

"I will think of something, I'm sure. Perhaps a cat; it would be more in keeping with my character, and my being an Animagus. By the way, I was impressed that you learned the spell so quickly."

"He said it wasn't that difficult," Harry pointed out.

"I think he meant that it would not be that difficult for you," she suggested. "I am sure that no other sixth year could do it, especially so quickly. You must keep in mind that with your power being what it is now, some spells will be much easier for you than for others." She paused.. "Getting back to Professor Snape... you should know that he will be as distressed about the headmaster's death as you or I am. We will never see any evidence of it, but it is true nonetheless. You may want to keep that in mind."

"I suppose I could have guessed it. The time we talked Albus out of doing the Cruciatus Curse on me at the demonstration... it was obvious that he was really concerned for him. I know there's a lot I don't know about their relationship. Can I ask you, do you know what it is? I know you can't tell me, of course."

"Yes, I do know what it is, and you are right, I cannot tell you. If anyone does, it will be Professor Snape himself. He may, someday, by the way. I am the only one apart from the two of them who knows. Anyway, you may want to deal with him regarding this with compassion, even though he may seem to disdain it and not require it. This has been as difficult a year for him as for me. Ironically, the one who it may have been least hard on was Albus himself. He was truly content."

There was a knock on the door, and Hermione walked in. "Professor?" she asked quietly; Harry realized that she had never been to McGonagall's quarters.

"Come in, Hermione," McGonagall said pleasantly. "I asked Harry to call you because there is something I wanted to tell you. Please sit down." McGonagall sat in a chair; Harry and Hermione, on a sofa.

McGonagall took a deep breath. "I think you deserve to know this, Hermione. In your confrontation this afternoon, you heard Voldemort say that he had been informed that you might have useful information. I assume you may have guessed the source of that information."

Hermione nodded. "Professor Snape," she said.

"Yes, Hermione. With Professor Dumbledore's authorization." Harry felt surprised even though he knew that Snape would not have told Voldemort such a

thing without permission. "Professor Snape was instructed to tell Voldemort that he had discovered that you were working on a project that was intended to undermine him, but that he did not know the exact nature of the project. You had to be made an attractive enough target to be worth abducting. That information, combined with your closeness to Harry, was enough to do it.

"I see that you are not upset by this information, which is very much to your credit. You know very well that this could have had disastrous consequences for you. For example, Voldemort could have spirited you away to try to get the information from you before the confrontation; that was our largest worry. He almost certainly could not have broken Professor Dumbledore's Memory Charm, but you would have been destroyed in the process. Even as events occurred, had you not manifested the ability to use Harry's spells, or if Harry had not been resourceful enough to find a way through Voldemort's wall of energy, you could have been irreparably damaged. Your parents could have been killed in the accident. Frankly, we did not anticipate that; we thought he would wait until the school year was over to do this. In any case, the whole enterprise was fraught with danger for you, and you were not exactly told all the details. I wanted you to know what was done, and to thank you for the bravery with which you faced it."

Hermione nodded. "Thank you, Professor. I guess what disturbed me most was what they did to my parents; I didn't think they'd do that, either. They don't know what I'm involved in, and I'm wondering if I may have to tell them. But the rest of it... I knew what I was getting into, helping Harry fight Voldemort. I think all six of us know what could happen, and that we might not have all the information all the time. I also know that Professor Dumbledore wouldn't have asked me to face that kind of danger without a really good reason. It was, and it worked. It's amazing that he managed to manipulate Voldemort like he did, never mind what he did afterwards."

McGonagall nodded. "I am still stunned by that. I may have to look into this mysticism business. Clearly, there is something to it." She gave them a self-deprecating smile. "Now, there is something else I would like to discuss with the two of you. Firstly, Harry, Albus told me that you had been attempting to teach your friends to use the energy of love in their magic; clearly, that has been successful with Hermione. Albus was convinced that your new spells could only be done by using that energy, and that it was not an easy state to reach. Even he did not know if it was something only you and he could do, but he suspected that such was not the case, and has been proved correct. What consideration have you given to including this in your classes next year?"

"I guess not that much, since I only found out about this a few hours ago. Of course, when we started the Saturday evening sessions, I knew that it was a

possibility in the future. But is one person enough? We all know Hermione's usually the first to get things. I kind of hoped that there would be more than one."

"I think Neville's going to be next," said Hermione confidently. "He's been making progress, I can tell, and I think what happened today will give him a big jolt, like what happened with Ginny did with you. I'm not going to be the only one, Harry, just the fastest."

"If that's true," answered Harry, "then I can't think of any reason not to teach it. I just wonder how long it'll take, and how parents will react to something so... experimental. But I don't think there'll be any problem from the students. I've already had some first years asking why I'm not teaching them how to use the energy of love, if I use it myself. My biggest worry is, what if some students just can't do it? They could spend all this time, and it would be wasted. I mean, I couldn't have done this when I was eleven; you know how my aunt and uncle are, and I didn't have any friends before Ron and you. I couldn't have succeeded in summoning feelings of love."

"Those are reasonable concerns, Harry," agreed McGonagall. "But I daresay that most students are not in the unfortunate situation you were in. Most have at least their parents to love, and most make friends at Hogwarts. In any case, I assume we agree that at the very least, this is something that it would be a terrible waste not to try to impart to students in some form, whatever the details may be?" Harry agreed.

"In that case, Harry... you will have plenty of time to think about this, but I would like you to consider altering your future plans. You are already the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, and you are uniquely qualified to teach students how to use the energy of love. If you leave at the end of next year to become an Auror, Hogwarts would lose an irreplaceable asset, and could not teach students what you have discovered. Imagine, Harry, a generation of wizards who use the energy of love. Not only would they be powerful, but they would never be tempted to become Dark wizards. How could they, having become so accustomed to using the energy of love? Not to mention that they would be much happier people, as you have become.

"If you become an Auror, you will be an excellent one, probably the best and most powerful. But by remaining here, you could have an impact on hundreds, eventually thousands, of lives. I know you feel an indebtedness to the Aurors, you would not want to abandon your plans. You could still be a detached Auror, continuing to train with them, and go on missions. You would be a special-purpose Auror, not an everyday one. Foreseeing this possibility, Professor Dumbledore has talked with Kingsley about this. Kingsley is not overjoyed at the prospect-they are very fond of you, and quite pleased that you wish to join them-but he recognizes the situation, and

your unique value to Hogwarts. He, and they, would not oppose your staying here, nor would it affect your relationship with them. Their attachment to you is as a person, not simply your future value to them.

"As I said, you will have plenty of time to think about this. But I am curious to know your initial reaction," she concluded. Harry glanced at Hermione and saw that she was quite curious as well.

"Wow... it's all a bit much. I'm honored at the way you put it, but I also can't deny that it's reasonable. Someone should teach this for a long time, and it does make sense that it be me. But I hate to think about not being an Auror, I've wanted to for such a long time. And I've really been looking forward to all that gambling," he joked.

McGonagall and Hermione laughed. "I'm sure they will keep you abreast of all such opportunities," McGonagall said. "Again, I know you will need to think about this. But I also wish you to know that Professor Dumbledore had strongly contemplated this, waiting only for someone in your group to successfully develop the ability that Hermione has. He visualized a likely future for you should you decide to stay.

"As I said, Professor Snape's appointment as Deputy Headmaster is temporary," she continued, noticing Hermione's surprised expression. "He is doing it only because it has practical value at the moment, and because Professor Dumbledore asked him to. Professor Dumbledore imagined that as we would then need a new Deputy Headmaster, you would be a suitable choice. I see myself remaining in this post for no more than fifteen more years, after which you would be more than ready to assume the job."

Harry was flabbergasted. Him, be headmaster? Or deputy headmaster at such an incredibly young age? But she was serious, he knew that. He looked at Hermione, whose radiant smile let him know what she thought of the idea. He still couldn't wrap his mind around it. "How could I be deputy headmaster at eighteen? Or headmaster at thirty-three? It just doesn't seem possible."

"Neither did being a teacher at sixteen, but look at how you have managed. You have done your job excellently, you are admired and respected by all students, and loved by many, especially the younger ones. For Albus's position and mine, or should I say, my former one, administrative skill is not what is important; leadership is. People must accept your leadership not because you are feared, as would be the case with a Headmaster Snape, or because they are intimidated, as many students feel with me, but because they genuinely wish to. This was the ability Albus had, and you have. You have seen it already, in your experiences. You are the unofficial leader of your group of friends. The Slytherin first years enthusiastically embraced your leadership after only one lesson. The path Professor Dumbledore has considered for you is not only

possible, it is utterly logical and natural. I do not tell you this as any kind of incentive; I know you would not particularly aspire to this. I simply wish to let you know what you could be letting yourself in for. But to do anything else would be a waste of your talent."

After a few seconds' silence, Hermione spoke. "She's right, and so is Professor Dumbledore. Think about the effect Professor Dumbledore has had on you, and on so many people over the years. You could have that same effect. I know you can't see that now, but you have to try. Remember those Christmas thank-you cards from the first years? They were serious in what they wrote, Harry. You've had a huge effect on them. You could do a lot of good, for many years. You have to think about it."

He smiled at her. "I have a feeling you're not going to let me do anything else, I know how you are."

She smiled back and nodded. "Yes, I hear that people hate it when I'm right."

He laughed. "Okay, I promise to think about it, that's all I can say. It just seems really overwhelming right now. I'm still only sixteen, you know."

McGonagall nodded, seeming to understand that she had said as much as she could. "And, Hermione, do you recall my suggestion at last year's Career Day, that you consider becoming a Hogwarts professor? Well, part of the headmaster's notion was that after Harry became headmaster, you would make an excellent deputy headmistress. I agree, of course."

Hermione gasped. "Thank you, Professor," she said. "It's such a compliment, I'm so honored... and if Harry does this, it would be so great to be with him like that. It would be wonderful." For Harry, the idea of being headmaster looked a lot more appealing, if she could be there with him.

"You would be extremely well-qualified, of course. Albus particularly liked the symmetry of the idea. Albus felt that he and Harry were very similar in many ways, and of course you and I are as well. The relationships are also similar; Albus and I were, though not life partners, extremely close; the same is true for the two of you. He felt that if this came to pass, Hogwarts would be in excellent hands for the future."

McGonagall looked at Harry. "Before I forget... I mentioned to you that we would meet sometime next week to discuss the disposition of Albus's property. But there is one thing in particular that he wished you to have as soon as possible; I retrieved it from his office earlier. Excuse me a moment." She went into her bedroom and came out in a few seconds, holding a large book. Harry stood to look at it as she approached him.

She handed it to him; it was surprisingly light for such a large book. On the cover, in neat, large handwriting, was written, "From Albus, to Harry." He looked up in surprise as Hermione stood to get a better look. He started flipping through the pages, which were very thin but sturdy; he guessed that it was five or six hundred pages. Every page was filled with neat handwriting, not printing.

"He has been working on this all year," said McGonagall. "He has allowed me to read it; needless to say, it is very impressive. It covers many subjects; his life and experiences, Fawkes, relationships, his beliefs, information about magic... anything he thought was important. There are many aspects of it which are directed to you in particular, of course; his comments on some of your experiences, and so forth. He has written a book with an intended audience of one."

Harry couldn't believe it... how much effort had this taken? Just for him? He immediately understood what it meant about how Dumbledore felt about him, that he would do this. He was very moved, and felt tears coming on again. He quickly handed the book to Hermione. Having seen his face, McGonagall was already moving forward to hold him. Overwhelmed, he started to cry, and continued for a few minutes. I guess I didn't get it all out the first time, he thought. Of course, there was a lot to get out, he knew. He hugged McGonagall again to thank her for holding him, and stepped back.

"This is... amazing, I don't have words for it," he finally said. "I can't believe he did this. Now I wish he were here, so I could thank him."

"I think he knows," McGonagall said. "He is elsewhere, apparently, but not gone."

"Harry..." Hermione paused for a few seconds in obvious amazement. "Near the end... there are detailed instructions on how to perform the Joining of Hands. He writes, 'I have a feeling you will be doing this soon, sooner than you think.'" Harry smiled as Hermione told McGonagall what Neville had asked that afternoon. Was it possible that Dumbledore had guessed it would be them? He decided that he wouldn't be surprised.

He went back to Gryffindor Tower; McGonagall asked Hermione to stay for awhile, which made Harry happy. He hoped they could establish a relationship, since he knew how highly each regarded the other. His head still swimming over the book, he climbed through the portrait hole and into the common room. He headed for Ron, Neville, and Ginny, and sat down with them. He showed them the book and explained it; they looked awed, as he had expected. Harry flipped through it and read bits of it to them; Neville was moved as well at what Dumbledore had written about the Joining

of Hands. All indicated a strong interest in reading it eventually, if Harry read it and thought that Dumbledore wouldn't mind.

He thought about heading to his dormitory at ten o'clock, but he decided he wanted to wait until Hermione got back. She returned at ten-thirty, glowing with pleasure. She didn't give details, but said that they had talked about many different topics, and that it had been a wonderful experience. For the others, McGonagall wasn't quite their idea of a role model, but they were happy for Hermione.

Harry and Ginny had gotten in the habit of going to bed at the same time, so they could talk for awhile before going to sleep. They did tonight, Harry telling her more details of his meeting with McGonagall. He hadn't told the others about her and Dumbledore's plans for the future of Hogwarts, but he told her. Naturally, she approved of the idea, and encouraged him to think it was possible and natural. She reminded him that he had been intimidated by the idea of teaching at first, and that had turned out well; she was pleased when he told her that McGonagall had said much the same thing.

After talking for nearly an hour, longer than usual, they signed off. Harry had wanted to start reading the book, but it was already rather late, so he regretfully put it off. He did his Occlumency exercises, petted and talked to Fawkes, and tried to sleep. Fawkes sang, and again he felt thankful to have Fawkes; he wondered how much sleep he had not lost because of Fawkes. The beautiful song guided him to sleep.

Harry was walking outside, the sunlight coming through the trees in beams which seemed to happen only in pictures, not in real life. He looked around and recognized the area where Fawkes had taken him for what he had come to think of as the phoenix symphony; again he was struck by its beauty. He wondered why he was there, and suddenly heard a voice behind him. "Harry, it is good to see you again."

Disbelievingly, he turned around. It was Dumbledore, looking as he had before he had gone through the veil. Astonishment gave way to joy, and he walked over and hugged Dumbledore. "Albus, it's so wonderful to see you... but you went through the Veil! What's going on? How are you here?"

"I understand that this is disorienting," Dumbledore said. "It is for me, as well. I am getting used to my new status, however. It is quite a change."

"New status... so you did die? How are you talking to me, then? How did you get here?"

"I am not really here, as such; I mean, not in this physical location. You are sleeping, and this is... not a dream, really, because you alone are not generating this.

This is a real experience, it is just not a real physical experience. That makes it no less valid, however.

"I cannot reach you while you are awake; too much is happening in your mind to distract you from this sort of experience. While you are sleeping, I can reach you. You and I have combined to create this setting. Fawkes took me here three times when I was in physical form, and I also could not but admire its beauty. This may feel physical, but it is not; you just hugged me, but our bodies are currently simply markers, forms created because you are used to it. We could communicate as disembodied forms, but this is more comfortable for you, and not at all unpleasant for me as well. The setting is a nice reminder of the pleasures of being in physical form. And to answer your first question, yes, I did die, in the physical sense. My physical body is gone, never to return. But obviously I do not feel dead, and in a real sense, I am not."

"I'm so happy to know this, Albus. I wish I had known before you died that I'd be able to communicate with you like this. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was not sure, and I did not want to raise your hopes for something that might not happen. Much of what I did was speculative; the only thing I knew for certain was that my spirit would not die. To answer your next question first, you are the only one I can communicate with in this fashion. One reason I taught you Legilimency in the last few weeks of my life was so that you would be able to unlock Hermione's Memory Charm, but another was to increase my chances of being able to communicate with you in this way. You became familiar with my mind, and I with yours; that has helped us form this link. You are doing it too, it is simply unconscious on your part. I am very pleased that this is possible. I have seen how you have grieved, and wish you to know that you need do so no more. I am here; I simply cannot be with you in the physical world."

Harry was amazed. "This doesn't feel like a... oh, wait, you said it wasn't a dream, I guess that explains it. Where are you now, if you're not in this place with me? Can you describe it?" He looked around, and found it hard to believe that they weren't really there. They both sat down on the grass. Harry picked a flower; it felt real enough.

"I am in a sort of in-between place, between the spiritual realm and the physical world; that is where the Veil takes us, and where we initially go when we 'die,' so to speak. We come here to get our bearings, to realize what has happened to us. We can stay here for a time if we wish, or move on, which is what most do fairly quickly. This place is more closely connected to the physical world than is the spiritual realm; were I there, I could not be communicating with you. There is time here, though it works differently. I can move forward or backward if I choose,

though I cannot do so in order to influence events. To do that, I must stay in sync with physical time.

"You see, when we reach this place, we generally do not attempt to interfere with events in the physical world. I am in a sense violating a guideline by what I do here. Not that there could be any sort of sanction on me for doing so, it is simply not normally done. But I am doing so, because this was my express purpose in coming here. It was I, of course, that caused Voldemort to lose consciousness. To do so was... very difficult. Even though I am not physical and know that my spirit is eternal, it was still a distressing experience. I can do it again, but only when absolutely necessary. I do not look forward to it."

Harry wondered what could intimidate a disembodied spirit like that. "What was it you had to do, to do that?"

"To say that I entered his mind with my spirit is perhaps the best way to put it. You already know that I connected myself to him by creating a temporary physical link between he and the Veil-the energy thread you saw-and I reinforced the link by penetrating his mind just before entering the Veil. Having done so allowed me access of a sort to his mind, similar yet different to what I have with yours. If he cooperated, I could speak to him in his sleep, but there would truly be no point to doing so. He does not know what caused his unconsciousness, and it frightens him. In fact, it may amuse you to know that his best guess right now is that it was something you did, though he cannot imagine what. Hermione's taunts reinforced that idea, which can only be to your benefit.

"As for the experience itself... the best physical analogy I can make is of diving into a body of ice-cold water, and then becoming so disoriented as to not know which way leads to the surface. It was like plunging into a sea of evil; for a time I did not know how to return to where I am, and I had the feeling that my spirit could dissipate and be lost, even though I know such a thing is impossible. What caused him to lose consciousness was the same thing that caused him to be unable to possess you: love. His mind was invaded by love, which he cannot tolerate. He fled, in a sense, until I was able to find my way out.

"I would say that we have one more piece of the puzzle, the puzzle of how Voldemort can be defeated. It seems highly likely that my ability to incapacitate him will figure in his eventual defeat, if that is to occur, but we still do not know how it will be done. I remain confident, however, that when the situation is upon you, you will know what to do."

"I'm very sorry to hear that incapacitating him is such a difficult experience," Harry said, concerned for Dumbledore. "I can imagine it, though, since I was possessed by him before. It was really awful." Harry looked at Dumbledore for a

moment, still finding it hard to believe that what he was looking at was not a real body. Deciding it didn't matter, he moved next to Dumbledore, and put an arm around his shoulder. Dumbledore chuckled, and did the same to Harry.

"This is a pleasant sensation, really," said Dumbledore. "My current status is pleasant as well, of course; this feels like a sort of nostalgia, for when I was in physical form. You must have many more questions. Feel free to ask them, or I can tell you things I think you might wish to know."

"Speaking of that... I was so moved by that book, Albus. It means so much to me... thank you." He squeezed Dumbledore's shoulder. "Did you really know that Neville and Hermione would want me to do the Joining for them?"

"I strongly suspected it; it was them I was referring to. And you are very welcome for the book; it was a pleasure to write it. It did not disturb me that its intended audience was so... exclusive," he said, smiling with his eyes as he said the last word. "It matters less how many people read a work than how well it is appreciated by those who do. You are, of course, welcome to allow your friends to read it, or anyone you wish. Eventually, you could even have it published, if you feel it suitable for a mass audience. It is entirely up to you. I did not know that I would be able to communicate with you as I am now, so I felt it best to write the book, just in case."

Harry paused for a minute, just taking in the experience, reveling in the happiness it brought. "Will you be able to do this as often as you want?"

"Yes, though I will not be with you in real time, so to speak, indefinitely. As I indicated, I cannot move through time for the purpose of influencing physical events. I will stay with you in this way until Voldemort is defeated. After that, I will move on, though not in the time frame you might expect. I do not wish you to have to say a final goodbye to me, so while I will not stay with you day by day, I will... speed up my perception of time throughout your life. For example, let us say that Voldemort is defeated on your eighteenth birthday. Soon after that, I will move forward in time, so that I may talk to you next on your twenty-first birthday, but almost no time will have passed by my reckoning. I will do so in this way for the rest of your life; I will be like an old friend who stops by from time to time to chat and see how things are going."

"That sounds wonderful," said Harry. "I'm really happy, I don't know what more I could have wanted, thank you." He chuckled, then continued, "Boy, I hope I don't wake up tomorrow and think this was a dream; it's almost too good to be true."

"In that case, I shall come back the next night to reassure you that it was not a dream," said Dumbledore humorously.

"Where is this place, anyway? It's so beautiful... I was surprised when Fawkes took me here, and amazed at what the phoenixes did. I got the impression from Fawkes later that I shouldn't tell anyone about it, like it's a private place for phoenixes."

Dumbledore nodded. "Your nonverbal communication with Fawkes is strengthening; your impression was correct. As time goes by, you will become more and more comfortable with knowing how Fawkes feels about things. It will not be long before it is second nature to you, as it was with me. I do not know the exact location of the place, nor is it important. Fawkes does us a great honor by taking us there, and it is only when there is a compelling reason."

"There sure was this time; I never would have made it without that. That reminds me, you must have been very happy to see Hermione use those spells."

"Yes, I was. You must make your own choices, of course, but I hope you will seriously consider what Minerva said last night. I feel sure that the use of the energy of love can be taught. Ironically, it will appeal to people because it will increase a wizard's power, but its true value is spreading the message of love, of the primacy of love. You see, the spiritual realm consists entirely of love; love is our true nature. That is why it is so powerful. Those seeking greater power will find greater love, and once they have the power, they will realize that it is not important. Hermione is right; this could cause a true revolution in our society. You are perfectly suited to lead it, both because of your experience in discovering and refining it, and because your status in wizarding society will be such that your words will be listened to respectfully; they will have instant credibility. You can accomplish so much more than being an Auror, worthwhile as that is."

"I understand... I did take seriously what she said, of course. It's just a big decision to make in a day. But you saying it as well gives it a great deal of weight. And it would be nice to have Hermione as deputy headmistress."

Dumbledore smiled. "Yes, indeed, it was very pleasant for me to have had Minerva as well. She was a wonderful friend; I'm sure you will convey my love to her when you talk to her next."

"I definitely will. By the way, who do you think I should tell or not tell about this? My feeling is that I can tell certain people, but I don't know if I want to go telling large numbers of people, who might not believe it. What do you think?"

Dumbledore appeared to shrug just by inclining his head. "It is entirely up to you; I have no opinion. Do whatever you think best. It is true that there will be those who will not believe you. The ones whom I told of my hopes to communicate with you in this way are Minerva, Severus, and Kingsley; they will certainly believe it, and I imagine the rest of the Hogwarts staff will as well. I must request, though, that you

do not display your memories of this to others in the Pensieve except in very specific circumstances; providing documentary proof of life after death is not my purpose here. People must discover such things for themselves, it is part of the journey of life. There is one general exception; you may show the memories to Ginny. She is your life partner, and she wishes and deserves to share your experiences, including this one. As for your other friends, they would believe you anyway, but I will provide small bits of information as evidence that this is not some creation of your imagination. For example, just to amuse Minerva, you should mention the phrase 'kitty-cat'; it was a nickname some friends had for her when she was young and had just become an Animagus. She will be mildly annoyed at me for telling you; it is my way of teasing her. Also, tell her that I disagree with her that she will never be as loved by the students as I was or you will be; it was something she said to me before going to bed last night. Tell her I said all she has to do is be herself."

Harry smiled. "I will. What about Professor Snape? Is there some message for him?"

"Not as such, but that is a subject I need to talk to you about. There is much you should know, now that I am gone. Before I left, I told him that I would tell you this if I could reach you in this way. He could tell you himself, but it is better that I do.

"I should begin by talking about what Voldemort referred to as the Cleansing. He is correct, from his perspective, when he says that it eliminates a person's 'weaknesses,' but of course he has a highly distorted idea of what is a weakness and what is not. Love, sympathy, kindness, caring, tenderness, and other such qualities are to him weaknesses. Voldemort cares only for how well his servants can serve him, and having such qualities, or even being able to have them, a person could become conscience-stricken at what he does to serve Voldemort, and betray him. Even if that were not the case, they would still serve as distractions, reasons for possible failure.

"In his quest for obscure Dark magic-and I cannot say whether he discovered this or invented it-he came upon a way of modifying the minds and characters of those who serve him. I say 'those who serve him' because the process, fortunately, cannot be done to one who is not willing. What he refers to as the Cleansing is a process in which he enters the mind of the subject and somehow mutilates the person's psyche. He summons up the feelings I listed just before and applies horrendous pain at the very thought or impulse of them. Whether it causes physical or only psychic damage I do not know, but when it is done, the subject is left utterly without the capacity for any thought or emotion which we would describe as happy or pleasant. We could say that there are similarities to what happened to Neville's parents, except that in this case, only parts of a person's personality are driven

insane, not the whole personality. The subject is left well able to serve Voldemort, according to Voldemort's needs, but useful for little else."

Harry was horrified. The idea that people would voluntarily submit to that was unbelievable to him. He started to have an understanding of Snape's behavior. "And this was done to Professor Snape, a long time ago," Harry said.

"Yes, Harry. But this is the remarkable aspect of the story. When Voldemort was at the height of his power, sixteen years ago, Severus Snape came to me. He had been a Hogwarts student, of course, so I was familiar with him, but had not known him well. He told me that he wanted to oppose Voldemort, that he had come to regret having become a Death Eater. I was skeptical, of course, suspecting a Voldemort ruse. Desperate to persuade me of his sincerity, Severus laid his mind open to me, asked me to use Legilimency to examine his feelings and memories so that I would know he was sincere. It was then that I first became aware of the Cleansing, and naturally I was appalled; I had boundless sympathy for one who had made such a disastrously wrong choice and now regretted it. It was his hope, which he knew was probably impossible, that I could somehow reverse what had been done to him. I later investigated the notion, but found that I could not. Even so, he wanted to oppose Voldemort, and after talking to him and searching his mind, I became convinced of his sincerity."

"But how did he manage to do that? If he was Cleansed, shouldn't he have become like the others, totally loyal to Voldemort?"

"It is very difficult to know," said Dumbledore, "because we know little about how the Cleansing works. Those who have been Cleansed stay loyal to Voldemort partly because they were already inclined to before, partly out of fear, and partly because they know he will allow them to indulge their appetites for killing and cruelty. After the Cleansing, those are the only emotions remaining-anger, hatred, joy in the suffering of others, and so on-and they stay with Voldemort partly because they could not live any other way. Such a person would be poorly equipped to live a conventional life.

"Nevertheless, Severus somehow summoned the will and desire to turn his back on that life, all the more remarkable because it offered him the only real emotional nourishment his damaged psyche could now recognize. Somehow, he clung to the notion of love, of happiness, even though he could no longer feel them; he embraced them as abstract ideals, as it was the only way he could. I embraced him, and did my best to encourage his tenuous hold on these feelings. I opened my mind to him, allowed him to summon such feelings and experiences of love and friendship as he wished, to experience them from such a distance as he was capable. He still could

not feel them, but he could imagine, he could conceptualize it. It was little, but no more could be done for him.

"Clinging to this tenuous thread, he went to work as a spy against Voldemort. He provided information that saved many lives, including Neville's parents' on one occasion. His information could only be used sparingly, of course, but it was still extremely helpful. What he did was all the more remarkable because Voldemort, at this point, had the upper hand in the struggle, and might well have emerged victorious in the end were it not for the curse failing against you. Severus continued his efforts even though it appeared that he was on the losing side. I had no doubt of his loyalty to me.

"When Voldemort was defeated by the curse which backfired, Severus did not celebrate, because like me, he was sure that Voldemort would rise again. But now he had to wait, and try to figure out how to live a life in the meantime. I assisted him as best I could, regularly allowing him to enter my mind and see my memories, no matter how personal or intimate; that I was willing to do this demonstrated my commitment to him, and increased his determination to persevere in his damaged state. You see, Harry, it was difficult for most Death Eaters to be re-integrated into wizarding society; they had to pretend to be normal people, despite their disability. Some, such as Lucius Malfoy, were sufficiently good actors to even be able to simulate the feelings which they could no longer generate on their own. But they survived mentally by indulging themselves in thoughts and fantasies of evil, of cruelty. Severus did not do this, or at least, tried not to. But imagine what it would be like if a cruel or terrible feeling was the only feeling you could have. We need emotions, we cannot help but have them. Severus wanted to have emotions; he just could not have the ones he wanted. The emotional sustenance he received from me was barely enough to keep him afloat, to cause him not to descend into evil. It would be so easy for him. Every day is a struggle for him, Harry. Every day he must fight the impulse to be cruel, to do evil-not because he wants to be cruel or to do evil, but because he wants... to feel. It is the only way he really can feel, feel anything. I never stopped being in awe of the fact that he simply survives from day to day without sinking into evil.

"Almost six years ago, you entered Hogwarts, and this was an enormous challenge for him. He had always hated your father, and even before you came to Hogwarts, I knew he resented the attention given you. You were to him a baby who had done nothing but was adored and celebrated by all of wizarding society, whereas he had taken huge risks and endured enormous struggle, but was not recognized or rewarded; the fact that you were James Potter's son added greatly to this feeling. Difficult as it was for him not to give in to larger temptations on a daily basis, it

would have been enormously difficult for him to treat you with the normal consideration with which one human being treats another. I could have insisted that he treat you properly, and he would have done his best to do so. But I knew what he endured, and I felt I could not ask this of him. I felt terribly for you, too, because you had already suffered at the hands of your aunt and uncle, then you came to Hogwarts, and one teacher treated you badly for no reason you understood. I know it was painful for you. But I knew you would have friends, that your experiences with him would not happen elsewhere. It was for this reason only that I agreed to Minerva's request that you be allowed onto the Quidditch team one year early; it seemed a small compensation for what you had to endure from Severus. But I weighed the harm it would cause you for him to treat you as he did against the harm it would cause him to overcome his feelings and treat you properly, and I chose him. You had burdens, but at that point, he had larger ones, and had been carrying them for much longer. I felt I could not add to them. I deeply regret that you had to suffer in that fashion, for that reason."

Harry's head was spinning; here, finally, was the reason for Snape's behavior toward him all these years. Now he understood, and even felt sympathetic to Snape. He tried to imagine what Snape's inner life was like, and felt he couldn't even do justice to imagining it. He was silent for over a minute.

"Of course I forgive you, Albus," he finally said. "I'm sure I would have done the same thing in your position. It was bad at the time, sometimes humiliating, but at least I had my friends, and I could commiserate with them. I can't even begin to imagine what it was like for him. I get this mental image of what his emotional life was like, and it's a desert, with the occasional cactus and tumbleweeds... and that's probably on a good day. Probably going into your mind was like watching a movie; you know you can never have a life like the people you see on the screen, but you can imagine that you can. Then, after two hours, you have to go back out into real life again."

Dumbledore looked at Harry, impressed. "Yes, those are both excellent analogies, especially the second. It was very much like that for him. And now, the movie theater has shut down, gone out of business. I am what helped sustain him over the past sixteen years, and I am gone. Through the years, we entered each other's minds on a regular basis. He came to trust me implicitly, and... he cannot love me, as such, but he feels an attachment to me that is as close to love as he can come. Minerva told you that my passing would be as hard for him as for you or her; in fact, I think it is harder. He cannot mourn, he cannot weep, he cannot feel... except anger at me for leaving him, which I know he does, to an extent. In a way he feels abandoned, emotionally."

Again, Harry tried to imagine it, and again, he failed. Suddenly, a memory from early in the year popped into his head. "For the demonstration of my new spell, the first one... you said there would be a cost to him if he did it, one I couldn't know. I guess I do now. You didn't want him doing it because it would cause him to have to sink more into evil, making it that much harder for him to climb back out, is that right?"

"Yes, exactly," said Dumbledore. "He was right, that it was less difficult for him to do than I, but it was still difficult for him. How hard he argued against my performing the Curse on you was very indicative of how he felt about me, even if he could not express it, or actually feel it in the same way you or I would."

"What's he going to do now? How will he get along?"

"I talked about this with him before I left, of course. I could think of only one possible solution. He naturally disliked the idea, and I understand why. I simply felt that there was little or no alternative. He must have support, or he may descend into evil, despite his wishes. Not that he would return to supporting Voldemort—he feels hatred toward Voldemort for what was done to him—but he would lack the emotional fortitude to continue to function as a Hogwarts professor and a spy against Voldemort. We would lose him as a resource, and you already know how immensely valuable he is."

"I understand. So, what's the solution that you..." He trailed off as he saw how Dumbledore was looking at him; his eyes widened. "You can't be serious," he said quietly, with astonishment.

Dumbledore looked grave, understanding Harry's reaction. "I do not know for sure that it would work; I only know that I could think of nothing else. I know it would be a very heavy burden for you. I was sixty-eight years old when I started doing it; I was equipped emotionally to handle the invasion of my privacy that it required. I also did not have the history with him that you have. It would be much harder for you than it was for me. I do not insist that you do it; I do not even specifically request it. I simply present it as a possibility; if it is to happen, you must both choose to do it. I do not know that he would agree even if you did. However, he knows as well that something must be done. You are the best person for two reasons: you have a full and rich emotional life, especially this past year, and you now practically radiate love. You could support him, and he could be nourished from your experiences, from your life. The challenge for him is that he has always detested you, but now he would have to regard you somewhat as he has me. Intellectually, he knows that you are a good person. So many love you, including myself, Fawkes chose you, and so on. He understands that if he were to depend on you, you would do your

best for him, and his faith would not be misplaced. It is simply a matter of whether he can change his perspective to what would be required."

Harry was silent, thinking. He had a visceral discomfort regarding anything to do with Snape; even the idea of spending time with him was disturbing. The situation had gotten better over the past year, because of Snape's change in attitude; it was no longer the case that a mere glimpse of Snape touched off Harry's adrenaline, put him on the defensive emotionally. He had seen Snape almost every day in the staff room, and had more or less gotten used to having Snape around, even though they hardly spoke to each other. But to let Snape into his mind, to have him rooting through Harry's worst memories, like in the fifth year Occlumency lessons-

"It would be very different from that, Harry," Dumbledore assured him. "If this were to happen, he would not, could not, treat you negatively. Since he cannot have positive emotions, his 'best behavior,' as it were, would be a total absence of emotion; that is what he would do his best to project when dealing with you. Were he to treat you badly, this could not work; he knows this. He would be looking at everyday memories, and more specifically at memories in which love and friendship were involved. That is what he needs, to help counteract the negative impulses he constantly feels."

"But why me, instead of anyone else?" asked Harry, still in disbelief. "After all that time of him treating me the way he did... I mean, I understand the reasons for it better now, and I do feel bad for him, for his situation. I can't even imagine what it must be like. But I seem like the least likely person to do something like this."

Dumbledore nodded patiently. "An understandable feeling, to be sure. But you know the consequences if this is not done, if it is not done successfully. Is there anyone you can think of with whom this would have a better chance success?"

Harry thought, and started to understand the problem. It couldn't be someone who didn't know Snape; not only for security reasons, but because Snape would need to know and trust the person who helped him. That limited the choices to a very few people. He thought about Hermione, then realized that he wouldn't feel right about asking her to take on a difficult task so he could avoid it, not to mention that given how Neville felt about Snape, it could possibly destroy their relationship. He thought about McGonagall; it seemed possible...

Dumbledore shook his head. "I discussed this with Minerva. She would be willing to try, but her personality is not suited to something like this. Severus knows this, and so would not be willing to accept her as the person to help him. You see, Harry, you learned to 'come from a place of love' during the Voldemort trial in September, and later, you correctly speculated that that was my normal state, more or less. As much as anything else, that is what he needs. His own 'emotional environment' is very

negative; a very positive one is necessary for him. With the right mental preparation, you could provide that, in a way that Minerva could not, nor could anyone else that he knows. I have touched your mind with Legilimency, and of course, much more deeply now. He saw through me what I saw in you; he was no less resistant to the idea at first than you, but he knows it could work with you, and that it could not with anyone else. I do not say it will work, but I do know that it could, and that you are the only one with whom it could. I very much understand your emotional reaction to the idea, and I assure you that I would not even suggest it were there another alternative." Harry began to see a correlation between what Snape needed, and the ability to use the energy of love. It was only he, Dumbledore, and now Hermione. "That is a good point, Harry," agreed Dumbledore. "The frame of mind necessary to use the energy of love is very similar to what is required for this." Harry again considered, and again rejected, the idea of asking Hermione. He didn't see how he could do what Dumbledore was asking, but at the same time, he didn't see how he could not do it; Snape's continued functioning as a spy was vital to the Order, to the fight against Voldemort. It was an incredibly daunting task, but against the stakes... why does everything have to happen to me? he thought.

"It does seem that way, doesn't it?" agreed Dumbledore sympathetically. It occurred to Harry only now that Dumbledore had been answering his thoughts, not his words. "Remember, Harry, that you are not really here, in physical form," explained Dumbledore. "I am understanding your thoughts whether you vocalize them or not."

Harry nodded. "Sitting here, I guess it's easy for me to forget that. I don't know... I just don't know how I'm going to 'come from a place of love' with someone who's been like he's been to me all my life." As he said it, though, he realized that he had done just such a thing with Voldemort; the difference would be that it would be in support of someone, not in opposition to them.

"It would be quite a challenge," agreed Dumbledore. "It may help to keep in mind how wounded he is, and how hard he has struggled. Also, that he had some legitimate grievances against your father; if you wish, you could see this as an opportunity to correct whatever wrongs your father committed against him. In addition, there is someone here who may be able to give you some assistance. It is not difficult for me to commune with others in this particular realm; I can help you to talk to them. Your parents and Sirius have already moved on, but a few individuals are here whom you could benefit from speaking to. I will summon one now."

Dumbledore appeared to concentrate, and slowly, someone shimmered into existence next to him. As the form solidified, Harry gaped in astonishment: it was a smiling, happy Severus Snape.

Finally recovering enough to speak, Harry stammered, "I... I saw you, in my dream last night... but how..." Understanding slowly dawned. "You're not him exactly, you're part of him... the part that was driven out by the Cleansing."

Snape sat down on the grass opposite Harry. He looked around in pleasure. "This is very nice, I've never seen such a beautiful place." To Harry, he said, "Yes, that's right. I am not dead, as such, since part of me still lives within my body, but I have sought refuge here. My body, my mind, cannot accept me now, after what was done. If I tried to re-enter, it would cause something like what Albus did to Voldemort. When my body dies, I will be able to re-integrate with the part of me that still exists in the physical world, and I can move on. For now, I must remain here; I cannot move on without the rest of myself. It is no hardship; this plane is very pleasant, and there are many ways I can occupy myself. For example, I can commune with others, now including Albus here.

"Harry... my other half can never do this, but I would like to apologize for the way I have treated you, he has treated you. It's difficult to know which pronoun to use; I have not used words to communicate for such a long time. Your father was abusive towards me, it is true, but I was no less so towards him. He simply had the upper hand because he had friends to support him, and I did not. My life was much harder than his. This is not an excuse, just an explanation. You in no way deserved what I did to you. I think I will choose the pronoun 'I' because while I did not personally do those things to you, I would apologize to you on behalf of both of us, or perhaps, all of me, if I could be re-integrated with my other half. I know that is impossible, so I do what I can. I have followed your life from this side with great interest; you are an exceptional person, more than worthy of all the love you receive. I have always regretted how you have been treated, and I was pleased that my other half was prevailed upon by Albus to treat you at least civilly this year. It was difficult for him, but he did well, as you have seen. I am proud of him, of myself, for that. I would be pleased if you could help him, and I could help you to help him."

Harry was amazed to see someone who looked exactly like Severus Snape speaking like this. He exuded warmth, peace, and love, and Harry could not help but wonder what Snape would be like if he still had this part of his personality. Somehow, seeing so clearly what Snape was missing made Harry feel more sympathetic to Snape; Harry also wondered how life would be for him if somehow this part of his personality could be taken from him. He knew that Snape had at one point chosen to have it done, but he could understand the idea that someone could realize too late that they had made a terrible mistake. Spurred by his emotions, he said, "I'll do it, I think I can now. I don't know if I could do it just if it was him as he is now, with what he's done to me... but now I know that he has this other half that was ripped away

from him, that the real him is both of you combined. If I focus on that, I think I can do it. Will you be able to talk to me sometimes as well?"

"Yes, I will, through Albus. And thank you, Harry. I know that it is difficult for you. Albus was most impressive... he was able to love my other half without even knowing for certain that I existed, his capacity for love is so great. Yours is too, but you are still young, and your situation is difficult. I do not mean to criticize you for relying on me to help you do this, for us. It is most amazing that you do what you do.

"Yes, I can give you help as time goes by. I can give you advice as to how to handle certain things. Albus could too, of course, but it may seem more helpful coming from me. Remember, Harry, he still may reject your help, at least at first. Accepting it will be very difficult for him. You should not force your help upon him; simply offer it, and keep the offer open should he refuse. He must accept it in his own time."

"I understand," said Harry. "Does he know that I'll have talked to you?"

"Yes, he does," said Dumbledore. "When you told us about that aspect of your dream this morning, we both knew what it probably meant: that whether my plan worked or not, I would in fact be able to reach you. He was reluctant to discuss it, even with me; it may be hard for him to accept that the 'other half' that he would like to have back is there, out of his reach. You may show him these images in the Pensieve if he would like to see them."

"If I do this, and he agrees, is there any advice either one of you can give me? What should I do, or not do?"

"Just be there for him as he requires," said Dumbledore. "Do not attempt to have exactly the same relationship with him as I did; these are very different circumstances. He may look or act hostile to you at times; understand that he is doing the best he can, and accept it with as much love and understanding as you can manage.

"One difficult aspect of this for you will be that you must allow him access to any of your memories, with no exceptions, no matter how private. I know that you have as yet had only the mildest of sexual experiences so far with Ginny, and that you will have more and stronger ones over the summer. He must be allowed to see those if he wishes; he sometimes accessed sexual memories of mine, though not unduly often. Part of what you will be doing for him is allowing him to vicariously experience a life with the fullness and richness that he lacks. I should mention that part of the Cleansing involves stripping away the person's sexual desire except as it is connected to violence; the only sex a Death Eater could enjoy would be rape. In any case, it is part of the human experience, a part he has never known. It cannot be hidden."

Harry felt his stomach churn. He hadn't thought of that, and found himself wondering if he could do it. Let Snape see things he did with Ginny? Worse yet, be doing the things with Ginny, knowing they could be viewed later? He wondered whether he would feel as though there were someone else in the room, and whether it would inhibit him.

"Your reaction is very understandable," said Snape, and Harry realized that he had forgotten that his thoughts would be as understood as his speech. "That is something extremely private, and I know you're concerned for Ginny's privacy as well. But you should understand, my other half is not a voyeur. He will be looking at all aspects of your life, not only that one. You said once that you viewed allowing him to see private memories in the Pensieve as similar to taking off your clothes when you went to the doctor; you may want to think of this in the same way. No more or less than your other memories, it is for his sustenance, not his amusement."

"By the way, Harry, this prompts me to mention something else, something somewhat connected," said Dumbledore. "You may need someone to talk to about this, if it is to occur... someone in physical form, that is. Minerva knew about my arrangement with Severus, and I was able to discuss it with her if I chose. This will be much more difficult for you than it was for me, and he will accept that you must have someone you can discuss it with. You may choose that person. My suggestion, which you may disregard if you choose, is that the person be Hermione. Ginny may not be a good choice for two reasons: one, it will be easier for her not to know that her private moments are being viewed in this way, and two, if you continue to practice Legilimency with Hermione, she will see your memories of your relationship with Severus, and so must be the one you choose. If you choose Ginny, for example, you will have to cease practicing Legilimency with Hermione. Of course, you will also now practice Occlumency and Legilimency with Severus, but you will find it more pleasant to do so with Hermione as well. You can still change your mind if you wish; you said yes a moment ago, but that was before you were reminded of this aspect of it. It is quite a lot to ask of anyone."

Harry reluctantly shook his head. "But you said that you couldn't think of any alternative, and this has to be done. And you're right, it would make sense to choose Hermione. But I must say, I don't look forward to, after this is all over, saying to Ginny, 'Oh, by the way...' She could be really angry, and with reason; partly because I did this without telling her, and partly because I picked Hermione instead of her to tell."

Dumbledore nodded. "I cannot predict how she will react, of course, but you know that she has always been understanding of your doing anything necessary for the fight against Voldemort. I do believe that she would understand that this was

one such thing, and why it was important that you be able to continue practicing Legilimency with Hermione. Your intentions are good, and she will recognize that."

Harry took a deep breath. "I suppose so," he agreed. "By the way... was that you, in my recent dreams? I mean, the you that died? How did you reach backwards into my dreams?"

"As I have said, I cannot move through time, right now. But I was able to... one could say, give a shout into your past consciousness. Naturally, it was strongest in the days closest to my death, and more vague as it went back into the past; you simply experienced it forwards, not backwards. I like to think it may have helped a bit.

"Well, Harry, we should not keep this going too much longer. As I mentioned, this is not a dream, and you need to dream a certain amount each night; if we talked like this all night, you would suffer a form of sleep deprivation, despite actually sleeping."

"I really don't want to stop talking, though," said Harry. "I still have so many questions... funny, I feel like a kid asking if he can stay up just a little longer."

Dumbledore and Snape chuckled. "There will be other nights, Harry, I promise," assured Dumbledore. "We are with you in real time. We will meet like this any time either of us has anything to say to the other. I believe we will, for quite a while. We must remain a bit longer; there are a few things to take care of. First of all, you will have to be precise when distributing these memories into the Pensieve. As I mentioned, you may show Ginny all parts of this which do not involve Severus. To save you the effort of explaining this to Hermione, you may show her the parts referring to Severus. And there is another person to whom you may show what you are about to see."

Snape disappeared, then after a few seconds, two more figures shimmered into existence. Harry did not recognize them at first, then his jaw dropped as he did. As one of them spoke, all Harry could think was, thank goodness this isn't just a dream.

Chapter 24

Back to the Burrow

Harry awoke at his usual time of six forty-five, and as soon as he realized that he was awake, he opened his eyes wide. Memories flooded him, and he felt a huge surge of joy and adrenaline. He's alive! Well, not really, but close enough!, he thought. He felt like dancing with joy, running through the halls of Hogwarts. He suddenly realized that that might not be such a good idea for one who was supposed to be

grieving, and he couldn't exactly tell everyone what had happened. He knew he would be believed by many students, but he also knew that to tell enough people would mean it would become public knowledge, and this was not something he wanted to explain in the Prophet. But none of this took away from his happiness. He had to tell the others, right away. He got out his Hogwarts map. Ginny, Hermione, and Neville were in the common room, no doubt waiting for he and Ron; Pansy was in the Slytherin common room. Harry immediately conjured his dog and sent it to request Pansy's presence. He quickly changed into his day clothes and pulled back the curtains on his bed.

"Morning, Harry," said Ron, who had just pulled his curtains back as well. "Get a good night's sleep?"

Harry smiled, a brilliant smile that he knew would confuse Ron, but he didn't care. "What?" asked Ron. "What are you so happy about?"

"We need to go to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom," said Harry. "C'mon."

"Before breakfast? You know I'm no good until I've had my three cups of coffee," joked Ron.

"You don't drink coffee," said Harry, going along with the joke, as he put an arm around Ron's shoulder and guided him toward the dormitory door.

"Yeah, but I'm thinking of taking it up," replied Ron. "I'm seventeen, an adult, so I should have a vice. Don't think I want drinking, look what happened to Mundungus." They stepped into the common room to see the other three looking at them.

"The dog was for Pansy, I assume," said Hermione. "What's going on?"

"Harry's very happy about something, and it's something he can't tell us at the breakfast table," explained Ron. They headed out of Gryffindor Tower.

They had been waiting for less than a minute when Pansy walked in. "You know, the Slytherin firsts are all hoping they'll get summoned by the dog at some point. They really like it, they were all petting it. So, what's up?"

Smiling broadly, Harry told them. He got the reaction he expected: utter astonishment. Like him, none had contemplated such a possibility. "Can you show it to us in the Pensieve?" asked Ron.

"I have very specific instructions about that," Harry said apologetically. "He doesn't want me showing it to everybody. Apparently, there is sometimes communication between people who have died and those still living, either by mystics or in people's sleep, but one sort of rule is that people on the other side aren't supposed to let there be solid proof of any afterlife. I'm not sure why; he said something about people having to find out for themselves. In general, I'm only

allowed to show Ginny, since she's my life partner. I'd like to show all of you, of course, but I don't want to violate his wishes. I am sorry about that."

"I guess he has his reasons," said an obviously disappointed Ron. "But, wow, it's so fantastic. Are you going to tell everybody?"

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Hermione. "A lot of people would think he was crazy, and he doesn't need that."

"That's pretty much what I think," Harry agreed. "I'm going to be very careful who I tell." He went on to relate most of the conversation which didn't involve Snape; they listened avidly. "Incredible, that he managed all that," said Pansy when he finished. "But he was such an amazing person when he was alive, I guess we shouldn't be surprised."

"There was one other thing that was talked about that I haven't mentioned yet," Harry continued. "You know how Dumbledore's always trusted Snape, had this relationship with him, that there was more to than we knew? Well, now I know, and you probably won't be surprised to hear that I'm not allowed to tell you what it is."

"Figures," said Ron.

"I can tell you this much: as I said, Dumbledore had a certain relationship with Snape, and it was important to the success of the Order, important to the fight against Voldemort. Somebody has to replace Dumbledore in that relationship."

"And it's going to be you?" asked Pansy incredulously.

Harry nodded. "Dumbledore thought it was best that it was me. I think I'm allowed to tell you, and I think you won't be surprised, that it's going to be difficult for me. Of course, I can't tell you exactly how.

"Dumbledore told me that McGonagall knew about his relationship with Snape, that he could talk about it with her. He told me that I'm allowed to pick one person to talk about it with. I can choose who it is, but he had a recommendation."

"Hermione," guessed Neville. Harry nodded, and turned to Ginny. "In a way, I'd rather pick you; I don't like the idea that there's something like this going on in my life that you don't get to know about. I don't like it a lot. But there are excellent reasons for it being Hermione. Unfortunately,-"

"You can't tell us what they are," Ginny finished, then sighed. "I can't say I'm happy, either. But I shouldn't be selfish. It sounds like this is going to be hard for you, and I want you to have the best help you can-"

"This has nothing to do with Hermione being 'better' than you in any way," Harry interrupted. "It just has to do with the facts of the situation. It's more as if I needed someone with brown hair rather than red hair. But I appreciate your being understanding about it. It wasn't my idea, and I don't know how well I'm going to do, but it has to be done."

"You'll do well, Harry," said Pansy. "You do well at everything you try."

"Thank you," he said. He was grateful for her support, though he wondered if she would be so sure if she knew what it was. "Hermione, there's a section of what happened last night that has to do with this; Dumbledore said I could show it to you. I think it'll take about five minutes. Do the rest of you mind if I show her now?" They said it was all right, and he did. Five minutes later, they took their fingers out of the Pensieve, and Harry put his memories back.

Hermione still looked astonished. "That was... extraordinary," she said. "But I agree, it needs to be done, it makes sense that Harry do it, and that I be the one he talks to about it." Harry looked at Ginny, trying to gauge her reaction. She saw this and said, "I'm all right, Harry, really. Don't worry about it. I can tell you feel bad, and that makes me feel better." She gave him a smile, and he smiled back his gratitude.

"The rest of it is stuff only Ginny gets to see, except for one thing. There's a two or three-minute section that's meant for Neville."

Neville looked startled, as did the others. "Why me?" he asked.

"You'll know when you see it," Harry assured him as he put the memories into the Pensieve. Neville joined him, and they put their fingers in.

They were back in the phoenix place, which was how Harry was coming to think of it; Neville, Hermione, and Ginny would see it, but just think of it as an idyllic setting, not connecting it to phoenixes in any way. The 'good' Snape had vanished a few seconds before this scene started. Neville looked around, and at Dumbledore, in astonishment. Then two figures slowly came into focus, and when they did, Neville's expression suggested to Harry that he literally did not believe what he was seeing.

"Hello, Harry," said a young man, dark-haired and handsome, in his mid-twenties. "I'm Frank Longbottom, and this is my wife Alice. We want to use this opportunity to say a few things to Neville, but first we want to thank you for all you've done for him. We know that you love him and care about him, and we couldn't be more pleased that he has friends like you and the others. Now we're going to speak directly to Neville." They turned a bit, looking at a spot close to where they were standing. Both Harry and Neville moved so it appeared the Longbottoms were looking straight at them.

"Neville," said Alice, "We're so glad Albus has formed this link with Harry so we have the opportunity to do this. You may wonder why we're here, since this seems to be where dead people go, and we're not dead. The fact is, our spirits can't stay in our bodies, really... well, we can for short times, but there's not much we can do there. Our minds were too damaged by what happened, it's as though our minds and bodies are equipment we can't use anymore. We can't move on, to the spiritual realm

where most people go from here, because our bodies are still alive, and we're sort of tethered to them. We don't mind, we're happy here, and we can follow what happens in the physical world, including your life.

"First of all, we want you to know that we love you, and we always will. We wish we could have been there for you. When I got pregnant, Cassandra was happy for me, but really worried; she had asked me before more than once whether I thought it was a good idea, since that was the most dangerous time ever to be an Auror. We knew that, but we wanted a child, and did what our hearts told us to do anyway. We're sorry that we had to leave you, but we're still very glad we had you. Your grandmother may be a bit strict, but she loves you, and has done the best she can. We're very grateful to her for what she's done."

Neville still looked agog, which Harry could completely understand. "We also want you to know that we're very proud of you," said Frank. "Not only for what you've done in the past year, which has been wonderful, but just for the person you are. You've always been kind and loving, and that's what's truly important. We're also proud that you're the sort of person who could attract someone like Hermione, whose heart is as good as yours."

"There's something you've wanted to know for most of the past year, so I feel that we should tell you. This did happen to us while the Lestranges were trying to find out your location. But you should never feel badly about that, as if you were responsible somehow. It's not as though they needed a reason to do what they did; that's what they do. They would have just killed us anyway, even if we had told them. But it was never really an option. You understand that, Neville; last year in the Department of Mysteries, you insisted that Harry not hand over the prophecy no matter what they did to you, and you didn't even know how important it was. This year, you risked your life to save his, and you would have run into certain death to help Hermione. You can imagine how it is with a parent and a child; there was nothing we wouldn't have done for you. We know how proud of us you are, and we're glad."

"What we really want you to know," said Alice, "is that we're here, we're all right, and we're happy. Frank and I still get to be together, just in a different way. You shouldn't feel bad for us. We'll be watching your life, but we promise not to look too closely, at certain times." She and Frank exchanged knowing smiles. "Again, remember... we love you, and we're always with you. Oh, and tell Cassandra to give you the five Galleons she owes me. And tell her I appreciate how she's looked after you, and that I love her. We'll be around, and we'll keep you in our hearts, as you keep us in yours. Goodbye, for now." The memory stopped.

Harry looked at Neville; he could only imagine what was going on in Neville's head. Neville looked at Harry, and Harry could hardly remember seeing a face with more emotion in it. Neville left the Pensieve, and Harry followed.

Hermione got up and walked to Neville. She looked concerned; it looked as though she couldn't tell from Neville's face what kind of experience it had been. He started to cry, and she held him. He tried to speak through his tears but couldn't; he finally managed, "Harry..." with a gesture to indicate that he should explain it. He did, and again, the others were amazed. "So it's not only dead people who go there," marveled Pansy. "Incredible."

"I wonder why this kind of thing isn't more commonly known," wondered Ron. "Then again, most people don't manage what Dumbledore did, or use the Veil for this kind of purpose."

"He told us at one of the dinners, the mystics know, and they tell people. Most people just aren't that interested, or don't take it seriously," said Ginny. "I mean, I never thought about it much. I will from now on, though. We're pretty lucky that we got to experience this."

"I guess it's one of the compensations for the dangers of being a friend of Harry Potter," said Harry wryly.

Pansy looked at him sternly. "There are lots of compensations, and if you keep making comments like that, I'll list them in great detail."

Harry gave her a small smile. "Maybe later."

Neville had stopped crying. He kissed Hermione and said, "They said a lot of things, but one of the things they said was that they're proud that I'm worthy of someone like you." Harry knew that that would make Hermione cry, and it did.

"We're all really happy for you, Neville," said Ginny. "You deserve to have had that happen."

"Thank you, Ginny," said Neville. "I'll tell you some of what they said, but later... I feel like I need to take some time to digest it. It was..." He trailed off and shrugged, making it obvious that he couldn't think of words for what he wanted to say. Harry could understand that feeling, as he had felt it a lot recently.

They went to the Great Hall for breakfast, and while Harry was hungry, he couldn't eat until he told McGonagall. She was at the teachers' table, at the end near the Gryffindor table. As his friends sat, he headed over to her. "Professor, I have to talk to you, privately," he said with some urgency.

"I am in the middle of breakfast, Harry," she said, gesturing to her plate. "This really cannot wait for that?"

Now Harry's brilliant smile from the morning returned. "That depends... does the phrase 'kitty-cat' mean anything to you?"

Her eyes went wide, and she immediately put down her fork and headed out of the Hall, Harry following. They walked to the Transfigurations classroom, the one nearest the Hall, and she closed the door. "He talked to you?" Still smiling, Harry nodded. "I knew he hoped to do it, but... frankly, I never thought such a thing would be possible. I may have to give serious consideration to having Mysticism as a subject at the school." Harry wasn't sure whether she was joking or not. He spent several minutes telling her about what Dumbledore had said; she shook her head in amazement every minute or so. "I am overjoyed that he is... alive, I want to say, but you know what I mean."

"Me, too," enthused Harry. "When I woke up, I wanted to go running through the halls, shouting about it."

She chuckled. "I understand the feeling. By the way, did he discuss Professor Snape?" Looking more somber, he nodded. "I take it, by your expression, that you are going to assume Albus's role." He nodded again, and she took his hand. "It is very good of you, Harry. I wish I could help you, as I helped Albus, but you will probably want to choose someone else... Hermione, I would guess."

"Yes," he said. "Also, he said to be sure to convey his love to you." Harry saw her love for Dumbledore in her eyes. "And he said you talked to him before you went to sleep last night, said something you were concerned about. He says all you have to do is be yourself."

She fought back tears, then gave Harry an affectionate look. "Thank you for the messages, Harry. We should go back now, you should get some breakfast." As they did, he thought that the next person he visited with this news might not be quite so happy about it.

After breakfast, Harry asked Hermione to join him in his office. They walked in, sat down, and he locked and soundproofed the doors. "I'm going to go talk to him after I talk to you," said Harry. "I just wanted to talk to you first. Since you're going to be my advisor," he continued with a small smile. "I want to know what you think."

She looked overwhelmed, which he could understand, as he felt that way himself. "It's hard to say," she said after a pause. "I doubt this has ever been done like this, until Dumbledore did it. It's an amazing thing he did for Snape, what you're going to do. I'm not surprised you agreed, though," she said admiringly. "I don't think you'd ever back down from a challenge, and as he said, there doesn't seem to be much choice. But it's going to be really hard."

Harry chuckled. "If Ron were here, he'd say, 'Way to buck him up, Hermione.'"

She gave him a half-fond, half-annoyed look. "I was going to say that my job here is to give you advice, but I guess bucking you up is really a part of that, too," she admitted. "I do think you can do it, Harry. I just meant that it would be hard in an emotional way-

"I was just kidding," Harry said. "But go ahead, what were you going to say?"

"Well, I mean, you already knew it was going to be hard, for example, to accept the idea that this is Snape you'll be letting look at your memories. Even though you know he won't be like he used to be, it's the emotional association you have to get past, which isn't easy. I gather from what I heard in the Pensieve that you're going to think of the Snape where Dumbledore is as being as much the real Snape as the physical one, and that'll help you get past most of your emotional reactions. I do think that's something you can do, with time. But I was referring to other difficulties, things you might not have thought of."

He gestured for her to continue. "One thing that'll be really hard is that you'll have to always be in control of your emotions," she explained. "Dumbledore would never have gotten emotional, gotten angry at Snape, never displayed impatience. He would have been a rock, emotionally, for Snape. You'll have to do your very best to do something similar. Now, if this had happened last year, I would never have thought you could do it, no offense. You know how you were emotionally, then. Now, I think you can, you're so used to focusing on love, you can do that when you're with him. But you'll have to try hard to stay in that state whenever you're with him, whenever you deal with him.

"Just for an example, let's say he agrees, and you start doing this with him. Now imagine a day a few weeks from now. You're at the Burrow, Mrs. Weasley's off doing something. You and Ginny are sitting around, enjoying being with each other. It occurs to both of you that you can go up to her room and really be alone." Hermione didn't elaborate, but Harry understood what she meant. "You head upstairs, you're really looking forward to it... and Snape signals you, he needs to see you as soon as possible. Your reaction is going to be one of frustration, annoyance. That's human, it's very understandable... but you have to not do it, or do your very best not to. Even if you compose yourself by the time you get there, he'll still know, and your being there isn't going to do him any good, I'd guess. Part of the point of this is that you're doing this to support him, that it's important to you to make sure he can get by from day to day. That's how it was with Dumbledore, and you have to do your best to be that way. It's not just a matter of controlling your feelings, or hiding them, but of having different feelings in this situation that you normally would. That's what'll be hard."

Harry slowly nodded. "I hadn't thought of it that way," he admitted. "But you're right. I mean, I really do want to help him, and I don't mind whatever time I have to put into it... but I can really see that situation happening, and you're right, that would be my natural reaction. I suppose it would be anybody's." He paused. "How do you think I can change that?"

She thought for a moment. "Here's an idea... let's suppose that I had some chronic illness, and I needed to be treated with a certain kind of magic, one that only you could do. I had to call you every time my symptoms got bad, and I interrupted you in the same kind of situation. Do you think your reaction would be different?"

He nodded. "Yes, I'm sure it would. I really care about you, and I'd hate to think of you being in pain, I'd want to come help. And of course, I see your point, that's how I should think of it with Snape."

"That's right," she confirmed. "Also, especially at first, he's probably going to be a bit reluctant to call you, more than he would have been with Dumbledore. It's going to be hard for him to get used to it being you, so his symptoms, if you want to call it that, may be more acute by the time he calls you. So the analogy may not be such a stretch. So for the time being, you might want to imagine that the Snape up with Dumbledore is the one suffering, and you want to help him. Even if the physical Snape looked into your mind and saw that, I don't think he'd mind; he'll have to know that this'll be hard for you too, and that you're doing your best."

Harry paused again, then decided to say what was on his mind, though he was reluctant. "You know, what you said about going upstairs with Ginny reminded me, there's something else I'm worried about. The first time I get together like that, with Ginny..." He trailed off as she nodded sympathetically, obviously understanding what he meant.

"You're afraid you're not going to be able to..." She searched for a delicate phrase. "...respond like she'll expect. It'll seem like there's someone in the room. I'm sorry, Harry. I can really understand that. Well, maybe not exactly," she said with a small smile.

Harry nodded. "She's going to think there's something wrong with me, she won't know the reason, and I won't be able to tell her."

She looked concerned. "I'm sorry, Harry, but... there's a decent chance that she won't think there's something wrong with you. She may think there's something wrong with her... that she's not attractive enough for you, that she doesn't excite you. I know that's worse, and I hate to tell you, but it's true."

"Great," said Harry, frustrated. He put his head in his hands. He looked up, and could see that Hermione's heart went out to him. He felt a bit better, and managed a grin. "Boy, I never imagined I'd be talking to you about this."

"Me neither," she agreed, grinning as well. "But, since I'm the only one you can... I know you'd rather talk about it with Ron if you could."

He gave her a quizzical look for a second before realizing she was joking. Then he laughed, releasing the tension he felt. She did as well. "His head would explode," said Harry, still laughing.

As their laughter died down, Hermione said, "It may not be so bad, really. You just won't know until you're in the situation. I think it's far more likely that, especially if you try not to think about it, your body will do what it wants to do. You shouldn't assume there'll be a problem; probably worrying about it a lot would make it worse. The best thing to do is assume it won't be a problem, have confidence in that."

"I'll try," he said, wondering if he could manage. "It seems like this whole thing is such a huge challenge, but it's all a challenge mentally. It's almost like I have to become a different person or something."

"Not exactly... I think it's more like you have to become the person you would have become in the future, just faster. Like with the Voldemort dreams, you're being tested in ways that make you have to try as hard as you can. And like at that time, you'll be supported. Not only by me," she added, seeing his expression, "but Ginny and the others will too, even if they don't know exactly what's going on."

He knew it was true, and it bolstered his mood. "I appreciate that," he said sincerely. "It always helps." They were silent for a minute, then he said, "Well, I'll stay here for a bit and get mentally prepared, then go see him. Any other advice?"

She thought for a minute. "Probably you understand this already, but he may be reluctant, he may question your ability to do it. He may even, intentionally or not, say things that'll upset you. He might try to see if you're going to get angry easily, because he knows that it won't work if you do. This is a big thing for him, and he may want to kind of test you before putting that much trust in you. So, and you would have done this anyway, but the thing is to keep calm no matter what he says or does, come from a place of love. Remember the other Snape, remember how wounded this one is. I think you can do it, Harry, I really do."

"Yeah, I guess I can see why he would do that," agreed Harry. "It's such a standard reaction, to get angry at him if he's being insulting, but I know I have to change a lot of reactions. I'll keep it in mind."

She got up. "I guess that's all I can think of." He nodded and got up as well, and she headed to the door, stopping to give him a last supportive look. "You can do it," she said firmly, and left the room. He sat down again, and focused on love.

Harry knocked on the door of Snape's office. The door opened, and he took a step in. Harry had never been there before; it was very neat and spartan. Snape silently motioned Harry to a chair, and closed and locked the door with his wand. He sat down and stared at Harry, expressionless. Harry tried to keep his expression neutral; he had spent the last ten minutes trying to develop a state of calm and love. Dumbledore had told him to have no expectations or needs from Snape's behavior, that if he helped Snape, it had to be unconditional. It was counter to Harry's experience, but he had resolved to try.

Finally, Snape spoke, his tone even. "The headmaster talked to you."

"Yes," Harry said.

"Was it a one-way conversation, or two-way?"

"Two-way."

"He told you about my situation."

"Yes."

"I assume from your presence here that if I agree to it, you will do as he asked."

"Yes. Well, he didn't exactly ask it, more like, raised it as a possibility."

Snape smirked a little, and looked at Harry as if he were slow. "It is the same thing. If he but 'raised the possibility' that you run through fire, you would do it. He was making a request, just very politely. You know, very clearly, what this would involve?"

Harry nodded. "He was very clear about that."

Snape looked at Harry with a penetrating gaze. "When the headmaster suggested this arrangement sixteen years ago, I was astonished that he would agree to such a thing. I felt that it must take supreme self-confidence, total comfort in one's own skin, and a lack of embarrassment, and in fact, I came to understand that he possessed all these qualities. I am sure that you would agree that you possess none." Harry nodded. "Why, then, would you agree to this? And I do not mean for you to answer, because he asked me to. I mean, what makes you think you can do it?"

Harry felt it was a good question. "I guess I don't know for sure that I can. But I think it's worth doing, and if he asked me, he must think I can do it, or at least that I have a better chance than anyone else. When he asked me to become a professor, I was sure I couldn't do it, but he was right. I believe I can do this." This was true, but Harry particularly wanted to come across as confident. He knew Snape would have to place a great deal of faith in him, and he didn't want Snape to think he was anything but determined.

Snape smirked again, and it occurred to Harry that it was probably his equivalent of a chuckle, as close as he could come. "Fate can be quite cruel; it has

been to me, many times in my life. The only time it was not was when it steered me in the headmaster's direction. Now it asks me to entrust my... continued ability to function to a sixteen-year-old boy, the son of my hated enemy." He looked at Harry again, and said, "In a way, though, it has been cruel to both of us, in this instance."

Harry gave a small smile. "It did occur to me that there's a lot of irony in it, at least. But I'm not my father, you know that."

"No, you are not," agreed Snape. "I see in your eyes your shame at what your father did. But you have been him, in my mind, for most of your time at Hogwarts. It was too good an opportunity to exact revenge on him to pass by, and it did not help you that you resemble him so strongly. It is simply not easy for me to change an... emotional perspective that I have held for so long."

Harry felt he understood, even if he couldn't empathize. "Maybe if we do this, you'll understand my life enough that I'll seem more like who I am, and less who he was."

Snape shook his head. "You do not understand. Intellectually, I know exactly who you are, and who he was. I know you are very much like him in some ways, and very different in others. The adjustment is an emotional one, and not as easy as simply realizing something, or accepting a fact."

"Sort of like my adjusting to the idea that anything that happens in my life from now on, no matter how intimate, is something you could see," suggested Harry.

Snape nodded. "You seem to be understanding a little better. Yes, it is much like that. You cannot simply decide not to feel a certain way. There must be a process of adjustment, if it is to happen at all."

Harry nodded. "That's up to you, I guess. I still don't know what you want to do."

"What I want to do, and what I end up doing, may be two very different things. I will ask you some questions, and in your answers I expect the unvarnished truth. No softening, no equivocation."

"You'll get it. Go ahead."

Snape eyed him carefully. "How do you feel about me?"

Harry raised his eyebrows a little at the question, then thought for a few seconds. "Right now, it's hard to put into one or two words. I found out so much last night, it's like I'm still getting used to it. I guess the best word right now is 'sympathetic.' I had this image of you, based on six years of experience, and now that has suddenly been overturned. It's confusing. But I feel extremely sympathetic when I think about what your life is like, how difficult it is. People said that what I suffered when Voldemort attacked me in those dreams inspired them to overcome their fears and say his name. When I think about what you do every day, how hard it

must be, it inspires me to be willing to do this, to give up my privacy like this. I think that's the best answer I can give you."

Snape seemed to be trying to keep any emotion out of his voice and off his face; Harry assumed it was because any emotions Snape had would be bound to be negative ones, and Snape must have decided to avoid being that way with him. The thought rekindled Harry's sympathy for Snape; he realized that for Snape, any genuine display of emotion when dealing with others would be something bound to evoke a negative reaction.

"And how I treated you for five years does not figure into this?" asked Snape.

Harry thought again. "Like I said, it all seems different now. It's like a kind of emotional adjustment like you talked about is going on, but fairly quickly. I feel like I'm able to separate how I felt at the time from dealing with you now, knowing what I now know. You may be the same person, but if I'd known then... and if I'd been mature enough to understand it, I would have seen it much differently, like I'm starting to now."

"Is there anything," asked Snape, "for which you hold a grudge against me, or did until very recently?"

Harry realized that Snape was trying to determine what hostility Harry still harbored toward him; he guessed that even though there seemed to be no one else but Harry who could do this for Snape, Snape still felt it was important that he had confidence that it would work. "Not a strong one, but your letting it be known that Remus was a werewolf, that stuck with me. The main one, I guess, would be the fact that I held you partly responsible for Sirius's death."

Snape raised his eyebrows. "In what way did you feel me responsible?"

"More emotionally than rationally," Harry answered. "Partly because you taunted him about staying in Grimmauld Place all the time, and I wondered if that made him want all the more to get out, and come to the Department of Mysteries. Partly because you didn't teach me Occlumency properly, and I might have stopped having the dreams if you had, if I had learned it. But I know there are flaws in both of those thoughts. Sirius was itching to get out of Grimmauld Place, and I know you asked him to stay behind; even if you hadn't taunted him, he would've come anyway. And while it's true that you used the Occlumency classes as more of a weapon against me than anything else, the fact was that I wanted the dreams to continue. I wanted to know what was behind that door, and I might not have practiced before bedtime anyway. But I think the bottom line was, I wanted someone to blame, and you were a good candidate."

Snape nodded. "Having blamed you for your father's sins, I do not find that difficult to understand. It may interest you to know, by the way, that a few weeks

after the Dark Lord's return, Black attempted to... reach a sort of peace with me. He was doing it more for the headmaster's sake than for his own, or mine, but he was genuine nonetheless. I harshly rebuffed him, with as much abuse as I could muster." Snape gave Harry a look that suggested he wanted to know what Harry thought of what he'd said.

Harry continued to focus on love. His emotions were aroused when anything had to do with Sirius, but he reminded himself to be compassionate. Still, it was difficult. "Before yesterday, if you'd said that, I would've been angry. Now, I completely understand why you did. You'd always hated him anyway, and even someone... not in your condition would have had to make some effort to... make the emotional adjustment, I guess you would say. You couldn't afford to spare the effort to make that kind of adjustment, and from your perspective, there was no reason to. It made much more sense to keep hating him, since he gave you a legitimate excuse for hostility."

Snape looked mildly impressed, as if he hadn't thought that Harry would work that out. "Why did you look at the memory I had placed in the Pensieve?"

Again, Harry thought before answering. "I was very curious to know what could be so important that you would go so far out of your way to hide it. At the time, I justified it to myself with the idea that you were rummaging around all my worst memories at will, so I should be able to look at one of yours if I could."

Snape looked a bit angry; Harry wondered if it was real anger, or anger serving as a kind of default emotion. "The headmaster had much the same thought," he said. "He was unsympathetic when I told him what you had done; he said that if you do not treat a person with respect, you should not be surprised when they do not do so for you. He was correct, of course." He paused. "Is this something you wish to do, or something you do because you feel it must be done?"

"I'm not sure I can say," Harry answered. "Maybe some of both. I know it has to be done, and I don't think Albus would have suggested I do it if he didn't think I was the best person for it. Or, at least, the only person for it. Obviously it's not going to be easy, or enjoyable. But I had a strong feeling of wanting to after talking to your... other half, I guess you could say. I assume that you knew who I'd seen in the dream yesterday, even if I didn't. Hearing him talk reminded me that you're not just who you seem to be. I can't begin to imagine what you've been through, what you go through every day. Whatever I go through to do this won't be a tenth of what you do."

Snape was silent for another minute or two; Harry focused on love while waiting for Snape to think about it. He thought about the Snape who had been banished, how he appreciated Harry's willingness to do what he was doing. He

thought about all that this Snape had been through; he found that if he felt his determination waver, a look at the emotional desert he had visualized strengthened it again. He realized how lucky he was, not only compared to Snape, but compared to most people; not because he was Harry Potter, but because of those who loved him, and because he loved them. He thought about Dudley. Dudley had friends, but Harry was sure it was nobody who he shared any emotional closeness with. He knew that most people didn't have what he had.

Snape took out his wand and quietly said, "Legilimens." Harry looked straight ahead and continued to focus on love, not resisting the intrusion. Memories began to appear in his head, and he soon discovered the common theme: mistrust or hatred of Snape. He saw himself agreeing with Ron, in his first year, that Snape must be trying to steal the Sorcerer's Stone. He felt himself burn with anger as Snape read the Rita Skeeter article about him aloud to the class in his fourth year. In his third year, he saw Snape give Ron detention for defending Hermione. He saw himself shouting at Dumbledore that Snape was responsible for Sirius's death. Some memories were only a flash of a few seconds, others showed a scene that played out for as long as a minute or more. Some were simply feelings, not associated with a particular memory; he remembered his frequent feelings of hurt, anger, and confusion at how Snape treated him, especially in his first year. Finally, the images and feelings stopped, and Snape was looking at him again.

Snape cast the spell again, and Harry saw Snape's other half talking to him, and smiling when Harry assured him that he would help the damaged half of Snape. He saw himself and Snape in Dumbledore's office, trying to talk Dumbledore out of performing the Cruciatus Curse on Harry. He saw himself, that morning, telling his friends that he would assume Dumbledore's role with Snape; he felt his determination, his sympathy for Snape. He saw himself and Hermione in the Pensieve, the horrified look on her face as she learned the truth about Snape, a horror he shared. He felt his own discomfort as he weighed this new responsibility against his responsibilities as Ginny's life partner, hoping what happened would not affect his relationship with her negatively. Harry realized that Snape was trying to gauge Harry's past feelings about Snape against his present ones. Is he trying to figure out how hard this is for me, Harry wondered, or is he trying to decide if he can trust me or not?

Snape finally spoke again. "Why is it so important to you that Miss Weasley know every last detail of your life?"

"It's not exactly that, of course, but I want her to know the important things. What her parents said, and it makes sense to me, is that the more of each other you share, the closer you'll be. I want her to know what's going on with me. If we start

keeping things from each other, we could start drifting apart. That's part of what having a partner is all about."

"Yet you value Miss Granger's advice, and the continued ability to practice Legilimency with her, above this consideration?"

Harry nodded. "It wasn't an easy decision, and it was mainly the Legilimency that made me decide that. I think it'll be much better if I can do that with two people, and considering how skilled Voldemort is at Occlumency and Legilimency, I think I need to get as good at those as I can; it could be important. Also, Hermione can give me advice and feedback that would be... more objective, I guess, since she isn't my life partner."

Snape thought, then cast Legilimens again. Harry saw himself in the infirmary, telling Ginny he was in love with her. He saw her kiss him while they told her parents. He saw them looking into their hands just after having been Joined. He saw her that morning, saying she shouldn't be selfish and that he should do what he thought was best. He saw himself talking to Hermione a short time ago, worried about how this could affect his sexual relationship with Ginny.

"If you were authorized to tell Miss Weasley of this, would you, in spite of the fact that she would then suffer some of the same discomfort you will?"

"Yes," said Harry without hesitation. "She would want to know, and want to experience what I was experiencing, even if it was difficult. I would want to with her as well."

After another silence, Snape said, "I have decided to accept the headmaster's suggestion that you assume his role. I feel I must further recognize that you are not he, and that this will be difficult for you in a way that it was not for him. I am prepared to make certain concessions to this, and one will be my approval for you to inform Miss Weasley as well as Miss Granger of the situation. I understand that you will require more support than did the headmaster."

Harry felt a surge of relief. "Thank you," he said.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "That is hardly necessary; you should know that I am incapable of an act of kindness, which your response seems to suggest you believe this to be. This is simply an action taken to ensure the best possible chance of success of this effort."

"I know that, and I didn't think it was an act of kindness," affirmed Harry. "It's just that the custom is to thank someone in that situation. I have a feeling Albus thanked you for things like that." He took Snape's silence as agreement. "How often should we do this?"

"It varies, depending on my need," answered Snape. "It could be as seldom as once a week at some times, as much as every day at others. Before you leave for the

summer, I will arrange a way for me to signal you that I wish to meet. You will be able to signal me back, informing me of the earliest time you can meet. Is that acceptable?"

Snape's tone was much like that of a person concluding a business arrangement, but Harry reminded himself that that was as friendly or polite as Snape could be. "Yes, that's fine," Harry said. "What about for the next few days? You could always go to Albus's office, but you can't go into Gryffindor Tower. Too bad you don't have a dog spell."

"That is just as well," replied Snape, "as my dog would probably bite the leg of the person it was seeking."

Harry chuckled, then looked at Snape quizzically. "That was a deliberate joke, wasn't it?"

"I am capable of humor, as you should know. It is simply not a sense of humor that would be to most people's taste. In any case, if I require you while you are in Gryffindor Tower, I shall speak to the headmistress." He paused, then said, "Was there anything else?"

Ah, so we're done for now, Harry thought. "One thing, I wanted to make sure you knew... Albus doesn't want me showing my memories from meeting him to people in the Pensieve, for the most part, but he said I could show you the section that had to do with you if you wanted."

Snape shook his head. "That is unnecessary, though I suspect I may be seeing some of it soon enough."

Harry thought to say something like 'see you later,' but realized that it didn't seem appropriate with Snape, so he just nodded and left. That could have been worse, he thought.

Harry walked down the corridor leading away from Snape's office. After turning the corner, he looked at his left hand, and saw Ginny smile. "If you can, I need to talk to you and Hermione, in my office," he said.

"That's convenient, I'm talking to her now," Ginny replied. "We're on our way."

When Harry walked into his office, they were already there. Harry conjured a third chair, and they all sat down. "I just finished talking to Snape, and he's going to accept me as the person to do it."

"Harry... I thought this wasn't supposed to be discussed around Ginny," said Hermione, with an apologetic glance at Ginny.

"That's part of what I wanted to talk to you about. I think at first he didn't understand that it would be difficult for me not to talk to Ginny about this, but he realized it at some point. He gave me permission to tell Ginny as well."

Hermione raised her eyebrows; Ginny said, "Well, I am Harry's partner, that's not so strange, is it?"

"It's a pretty big concession on his part, which you'll understand after you hear what the situation is," said Hermione.

"I'm going to show her what I showed you in the Pensieve," said Harry. "I know Dumbledore said only to show you, but he didn't know Snape was going to let me tell her as well. I can't explain it nearly as well as they did." He started putting his memories into the Pensieve, which he now kept in a desk drawer.

"What do you mean, 'they?'" asked Ginny. "I thought it was just Dumbledore. Were there more people, like Neville's parents?"

Hermione shook her head, still amazed at what she had seen before. "That sounds like an easy question to answer, Ginny, but it's really not." They entered the Pensieve, and when they came out, Ginny was as obviously astonished as Hermione had been. But, Harry knew, she was also disturbed. They sat back down in their chairs.

"I don't know what to say," she said, "either about the thing with Snape, or what you'll be doing because of it. You were really going to not tell me about this?"

Harry found himself hoping that this would be as angry as she would get. "Like I said earlier, I wasn't happy about the idea of not telling you. I just didn't see that I had much choice. I need to practice Legilimency, and I need to do it with Hermione."

"So, from now on, everything we do... I mean, this conversation, right now, he could be watching this! He might as well be in the room right now. How in the world are we going to..." She didn't finish, but her meaning was clear to Harry.

Harry took a deep breath. He barely managed not to say, 'how do you think I feel about it?' Instead, he said, "Right now, I'm glad we had the Joining done, for some of the same reasons you were, when we had it done."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Don't be ridiculous, Harry, I wouldn't leave you, even if I could. I'm just upset right now, I don't think you can blame me for that."

"No, I don't," he said, and couldn't think of anything to say after that. Hermione looked awkward, as if she didn't belong there, but Harry was glad she was. Ginny put her head in her hands.

After a minute of silence, Ginny said, "So, what do we do now?"

"What I would say," said Harry, "what I tried to do when I thought about this, is put yourself in his shoes, I mean, really try to imagine it. Yes, he didn't have to choose to be a Death Eater, he made a mistake. A really big one. But imagine this has been done to you, and you realize that it was a mistake. In a way, your life is over, you can't live like people are supposed to live. The best you can do is imagine that you could live another way. Try to imagine what that would be like."

She thought for a minute. "I don't know if anybody could, really imagine that. I'm not saying it's not horrible, and I'm not saying I don't feel bad for him. I do. But..." She sighed. "I just can't get used to the idea in five minutes, Harry. I know all the facts now, and it's true, I don't know who would do this if not you. I can't imagine anyone else doing it, it's such a huge thing." She chuckled. "I knew when I got you for a partner that I was getting myself into a lot. I just never imagined that it would be anything like this."

"Neither did I," he agreed.

"You saw his face when Dumbledore said this," said Hermione quietly to Ginny. "He felt a lot like you do now, he's just had time to get used to the idea. I'm not saying it'll be easy, but-"

"Yeah, but you don't know what it's like, to have to imagine someone seeing you, in a really private moment," Ginny responded.

Hermione raised her eyebrows at Harry. "You never told her?"

"It never came up," he replied.

"Ginny, you know that a few weeks ago, Harry started practicing Legilimency with me," said Hermione. "The first time we did it, he stumbled across an image... remember that day you arranged for Neville and I at the Burrow?"

Ginny's eyes went wide. "What did you see?" she asked him.

Hermione answered. "Neville and I, kissing, with our shirts off." Ginny looked even more surprised. "He didn't mean to, of course, he felt terrible," continued Hermione. "It took me ten minutes to convince him he shouldn't feel bad. I knew it was important for him to learn it, so I took the risk of what he might see. But you see my point; I do know what it's like, to imagine that. I would do it again. In fact, I will do it again. I'm still going to practice with him, he needs to practice. I'm going to do more than that with Neville over the summer, but I don't care."

Harry looked confused. "But we can put your memories into the Pensieve, we already talked about that."

"No," she said. "I'm not going to do that. I'll take my chances."

"What?" Harry blurted out. "What's the point of that? How's it going to help me if you do that?"

Ginny looked at Hermione, obviously touched. "She's not doing it for you, Harry, she's doing it for me," said Ginny. "She's saying, she'll take the same chance voluntarily that you and I have no choice but to take."

Harry should have recognized that sooner, he thought, but in his emotional reaction he missed it. "Hermione, that's sweet, but you don't have to," he said. "It's not like that's something I really want to see."

"Of course not, Harry, that's part of the point," said Hermione. "I think that you and Ginny, doing stuff like that, isn't something he really wants to see, either. But it's part of your life, or it's going to be, and what he needs is to see your life, all of it. I think the other Snape is right, thinking of him like a doctor isn't a bad idea. When we practice, you could stumble across something else, I know it isn't something you want to do. You heard Dumbledore, he didn't look at it any more than anything else. I know the hard part is the idea of someone looking at all. But at least I'll be with you."

Harry had not expected the conversation to go this way, to put it mildly. "So, you'll give us moral support by doing something that could completely embarrass me?"

Ginny smiled a bit, and so did Hermione. "Irony, isn't it?" said Hermione.

"It does make me feel a bit better, to tell you the truth," said Ginny to Harry. "Now I feel like, she knows what it feels like. I won't be alone. I mean, I'm still not happy, but..." She trailed off.

Well, at least it makes her feel better, Harry thought. He didn't fancy the idea of seeing any more of Hermione and Neville than he already had, but he couldn't deny that it was a kind gesture on Hermione's part. He also knew that despite what had happened with Hermione before, the chances of actually seeing that kind of memory weren't high. "This kind of reminds me," he said to Ginny, "of when I was telling the first years how I used thoughts of love to drive Voldemort out of my mind, you just came up and told me you loved me, so I wouldn't be so embarrassed."

She smiled. "Well, I would've done that anyway, but I can't deny that I was happy for an excuse to tell you I loved you."

He smiled back. "I guess that makes sense now, but I wouldn't have imagined it then. I guess it's safe to say that Hermione isn't looking for an excuse to show me what she and Neville are going to get up to."

"Yes, that's safe to say," agreed Ginny, "which makes it more impressive. You're such a wonderful friend, Hermione. We couldn't want a better friend than you."

"Or imagine one, I'd say," agreed Harry.

"Thank you, both of you," said an obviously touched Hermione. Harry went on to tell them the rest of what had happened in the meeting with Snape, and they talked about it for a while. Harry felt that Ginny was slowly starting to get used to the idea, or at least wasn't as acutely uncomfortable with it as she had been at first. I hope we can both get to where it doesn't bother us, he thought. He knew it wouldn't be easy.

The three of them went back to Gryffindor Tower after they were finished talking about the situation with Snape. Ron suggested to Harry that they have a fly, and Harry agreed. They invited Ginny, but she declined; Harry wondered whether she needed time alone to think, or just wanted to make sure Ron had some time with Harry. They took their brooms and headed toward the castle entrance, but when they got near it, they were twice stopped by official-looking wizards who were obviously there early for whatever ceremony was planned for Dumbledore. Harry didn't know them, but they introduced themselves and offered their condolences, which Harry politely accepted and moved on. When they got out of the castle, Harry muttered, "I really should have used my Invisibility Cloak." Ron chuckled.

They flew and raced for about forty-five minutes, then headed back down. Harry wanted to sit for a minute, so they took seats in the stands surrounding the Quidditch pitch. Harry looked around, enjoying the pleasant weather, thinking of Dumbledore.

Ron looked at him and asked, "Are you going to have to pretend you're sadder than you are at the ceremony, since you can't tell them that he's alive, well not really, but-"

Harry nodded. "I keep thinking of him like that, too. Hard not to, since I talked to him, he looked pretty alive. Well, I won't have to pretend too hard. I still wish he were here. But I can't smile, I know that. It just all seems so pointless, this ceremony. A lot of these people, especially Ministry people, didn't know Dumbledore that well, they're just here because he was important."

Ron looked thoughtful. "I wouldn't be so sure, Harry. Remember, Dumbledore had been headmaster for forty years, and a teacher for another fourteen. That means anyone under the age of... let's see... sixty-five was at Hogwarts for all seven years with him, and that's a lot of people. I think most are coming not because they have to come, but because since they're Ministry people, they can. I bet more than half of the wizarding population of England would come if they could. Even if they were on Fudge's side last year, I bet they still respected and liked Dumbledore."

"Maybe you're right. I hope so. I wish I could tell everyone what happened last night... but I know I can't."

"I'm surprised he didn't just give you bits of information to tell certain people, so they would know for sure it was true. Did that have to do with that thing about not wanting to give proof?"

"No," said Harry, "anything spoken wouldn't be proof anyway, not real proof. I think he knew most people I told would know me well enough to know that I know the difference between that and a dream. But he did say a few things like that anyway,

just because he wanted the people close to me to be sure, if they had any doubts. He had one for McGonagall, for Pansy, for you, and a couple of other people. There wasn't one for Ginny, Hermione, or Neville, because they got to see stuff in the Pensieve."

"What was the one he said for me?" asked Ron, obviously curious.

"It's kind of personal," Harry warned.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Harry, if it's about me, then I know it, and if he told you, then you know it. I'd just as soon know what you know about me anyway, not to mention I'd want to know no matter what it was."

"Okay," Harry agreed. "He said that you were thinking about death because of what happened with him, that it could happen any time, and it made you wonder whether you were waiting too long to tell Pansy how you feel about her."

Ron looked a little embarrassed, but smiled. "I bet the rest of you are wondering that too. I have a feeling the way I feel about her isn't any secret." Harry shook his head with a small smile. "I'm pretty sure she knows, too, and I think she feels the same way. She held my hand at your Joining, that gave me a pretty good idea. I guess I've been waiting to do anything because... I don't want either of us to feel like we did it for the wrong reasons. I mean, there's six of us in our group now, and Hermione and Neville were a couple, then you and Ginny... it's like, people will look at it and say, 'well, it's obvious that Ron and Pansy should be together,' like it had to happen. I didn't want either of us to wonder whether it was like that. But she knows I like her, I think she knows why I'm being slow about it."

Harry grinned to make sure Ron knew what he was about to say wasn't serious. "So, it's not because you're scared in any way."

"I totally deny that," Ron replied, also grinning. They were silent for another minute. "I have to say, Harry, I envy you that you still get to talk to Dumbledore. Don't get me wrong, you deserve it... I think you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I do," said Harry. "I'm so happy about it. I mean, I would have just been happy to know for certain that he still existed, in some way. But this... I couldn't have hoped for anything like this. He's just... amazing, no less so now."

Ron nodded, and they were silent again. "I guess we should be getting back. But we should do this a few more times before the term ends," said Ron.

"Yeah, I agree, we should talk like this more," said Harry with a smile, letting Ron know he knew that Ron meant the flying, not the talking. Ron shook his head and chuckled, and they headed back to the castle.

Harry looked around and saw Dumbledore standing by the stream he had first noticed when Fawkes had taken him there. He walked up to Dumbledore and hugged

him; he knew that he would be wishing he could if Dumbledore was beyond contact. "I felt like I wanted to ask you how you were doing, but it occurred to me that the answer would be the same every time, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it would," answered Dumbledore. "Even in the physical realm I was fairly even-tempered, but here, there is no such thing as pain or discomfort, and one is constantly reminded that one's spirit is eternal. It would be impossible not to relax here, to not feel rejuvenated."

"And it's the same for the other... realm? The one you go to after this?"

"Indeed, even more so," replied Dumbledore. "This place has qualities which are a mix of the physical and the spiritual realms. In the spiritual realm, one is constantly in an atmosphere of love. People in physical form talk about the physical world being 'real' and imply that anything else is not, but the fact is that the spiritual realm is what is truly 'real.' The physical world, the physical universe for that matter, is but a construction for our experience and edification. It is real in its own way, but the spiritual realm is our true home. The physical realm is simply a place we go once in a while, much as we go to our jobs while in physical form."

Harry tried to wrap his mind around the idea, and couldn't quite do it, but he knew he would have many more visits to work on it. "If there's no pain, or anything but love, in the spiritual realm, why do we even go to the physical world? Why not just stay in the spiritual realm?"

"Some beings do," said Dumbledore. "But part of why we are here is to learn, to experience. You know very well from your experience that we learn more when we have challenge, when we are pushed. We can learn much faster in physical form than we can as our true spiritual selves."

"In that case, I must be setting some kind of record for learning," Harry joked.

Dumbledore laughed. "It does seem that way, yes. I take it you have more questions about the situation with Severus."

Harry had noticed that from this place, Dumbledore had totally dispensed with the using of titles; he imagined that such things weren't important in this realm.

"Yes, could we call..." He trailed off as the smiling Snape shimmered into view.

"Hello, Harry," said Snape, walking forward to embrace Harry. Harry hugged him back happily, though feeling a bit odd in hugging someone who looked exactly like Snape, and he wondered what the physical Snape would think if he saw this image in his mind.

"It's a good question," said Snape. "But that is a part of what the whole process is about, for him; it's a different perspective. He cannot conceive of

embracing you literally, but if he sees this, he will see that there is, or was, a part of him who can. That is something worth knowing."

"Yes, but that's part of something I was wondering when I was talking to Ginny and Hermione about it. He can see memories of my talking to people about his situation. Couldn't that affect the situation itself?"

"Only if you act differently than you otherwise would because you know he could eventually see it, which you will not," said Dumbledore. "Today, you did nothing differently because you knew he might see it, and I am sure you will continue to do that. One of the reasons you were appropriate to take over for me was that you have become so open a person; due to the Voldemort trial in September, you had no choice. It was an adjustment for you to know that anything you do could be seen, but it was an even bigger adjustment for that person to be Severus. If it had been me, I suspect that even the sexual aspect would not particularly disturb you."

"No, because I trust you completely," agreed Harry. "Like... like Hermione trusts me, that she's willing to do what she's going to do."

Dumbledore nodded. "I see you had not quite thought of it that way until now, but yes, it is very similar. It is an extraordinarily high compliment that she pays you, as well as a gesture of support to Ginny, that she will compromise her privacy even though she need not do so. Getting back to the issue of trust in your situation, you should understand that you can trust Severus, even if your experience tells you that you should not. Before, as he said, he thought of you as if you were your father; he knows that he cannot do that any longer. Nor, now that he has accepted you as the person to replace me, will he wish to. He will, as he said, have to make an emotional adjustment, and he is in the process of doing so."

"From a purely rational point of view," added Snape, "he won't want to do anything to cause you distress, as he will now depend on you, in a very important sense. You saw that today when he gave you permission to tell Ginny about the situation; he did so because he realized that not doing so could cause you a great deal of stress. It was not easy for him, because it meant having to trust one more person with such an intimate secret, but he did it anyway. He actually contemplated assuring you that he would not access sexual memories at all, but he realized that it is part of what is necessary for him, that it would not be the same if access to any particular thing were restricted. He is concerned that you and she will act differently than you otherwise would because of him, but he understands that there is nothing he can do about that, that you and Ginny must overcome this obstacle if it is to be overcome."

"I have a feeling you will," said Dumbledore with a knowing smile. "The teenage sex drive is quite powerful. At some point, you will almost certainly decide that you do not care who sees what, that you will do what you want to do."

Harry hoped that Dumbledore was correct. "Well, I am glad to hear that he at least considered not looking at sexual memories; it may make it easier for Ginny and I to just consider it another part of our lives, that to him is no more special than anything else. I was glad that she didn't have any worse a reaction than she had today."

"Indeed, many would have reacted very badly to such information," agreed Dumbledore. "She could not adjust instantly, as she pointed out, but she did quite well given the circumstances. She has been looking forward to this greatly, and to have it disturbed in such a way was a great disappointment. She will eventually realize that it need not affect her enjoyment of the experience at all; it will just take time."

Harry fervently hoped so. "You said yesterday that you looked into his mind too. Why did you do that? Is it something I should do?"

"He did not mind my doing so; I did it in order to check on his emotional state, out of concern. It was not strictly necessary, but he appreciated the thought behind it. I would not recommend that you even consider doing it until you are more used to each other in this situation. He gave me a certain deference that he will not give you, especially at first."

"You should know, though," said Snape, "that while he cannot like you, he has considerable respect for you, both who you are as a person and for the effort you make in doing this for him. He simply relied on Albus in a way that cannot be the same with you, due to your age and relative lack of maturity. Bear in mind, you are unusually mature for a sixteen-year-old; you are simply not as mature as Albus was, and that was what Severus was used to. He will adapt; what you are doing for him was by far the most important part of what Albus did for him."

Harry understood. "Obviously he wouldn't deal with me in just the same way he did with Albus." He thought about the physical Snape for a minute, then asked Dumbledore, "There was something I was wondering about yesterday. Last night you mentioned that how hard he argued against you doing the Curse on me for that demonstration was an indication of how he felt about you. But it seems like that requires him to have some qualities that should have been banished by the Cleansing. He was obviously concerned for you; it certainly seemed as though he cared about you and didn't want you to suffer. How could he do that?"

Snape answered. "When people lose limbs, or sight or hearing, they can often find ways to do what they used to do; this is very much like that. He knew that if he were not handicapped in this way, he would be concerned about Albus. He was able to know what to do if he could feel that way; it's very much like acting. If you had to act like you hated someone, you could probably do it if you really tried. He can use what emotions he does have, just in a different way. So, when he was arguing with

Albus, he was angry with him-since he can be angry-for not doing things the most reasonable way. It wasn't such a stretch, since you may recall you too were angry with him at the time. He can choose any action he wants, and he can give any appearance he wants; it's just what he actually can feel that's restricted. It's rare for him to 'act' in that way, though, since most of the time it's not necessary, and it requires a certain effort. He did at times this year, after Albus insisted that he treat you with the respect your position merited. He was so used to hating you that at first it required an acting performance to give the impression that he did not. As time went by, it became less and less an act, so the adjustment he must make now to accept you in this role is not nearly as large as it might have been. Even now, it's a significant emotional adjustment; last September, it simply would not have been possible for him. It would have been too much."

"I guess I can understand that," said Harry. The more he heard about how it was for Snape, the more determined he was to do what was needed. Still, he knew it would be hard.

Harry and Neville walked out of the Aurors' fireplace at the usual time of nine o'clock the next day, and were greeted by Kingsley, Cassandra, and Tonks. "We were sorry we couldn't make it to the ceremony yesterday," said Kingsley. Cassandra and Tonks looked at Harry sadly, and kissed him on the cheek; Harry realized that he tended to forget that there was a purple dot on his forehead, which served as a vivid reminder to others of his loss.

"Thanks, I appreciate it," he said. "But something really good happened the night after he died." He told them about it, and like everyone else he had told, they gaped. "I wouldn't have believed it was possible," said Cassandra.

"He told me that he would try," said Kingsley, "and I thought, if anyone can, he can. But it's just amazing. What did he say?"

Harry gave them a recap of the parts not having to do with Snape, and finished by saying, "...and it turns out that there are other people there, and he can let me talk to them if I want." Harry had talked to Neville before they had left, so he knew that Neville intended to tell them what he had seen. "Who did you see?" asked Tonks eagerly.

"Well, I was surprised because they're not dead, but their spirits are where you first go after you die," Harry explained. "I saw Neville's parents. They left a message for Neville in my memory, he saw it in the Pensieve."

The Aurors were astonished. "How is that possible?" asked Tonks. Harry explained what he understood of it.

"What did they say, Neville?" asked Cassandra.

With a small smile, Neville said, "My mum said that you should give me the five Galleons you owed her."

Cassandra put her hand to her mouth and gasped. "I'd forgotten all about that," she said. She reached for her money pouch and looked for the Galleons as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"You shouldn't cry, Cassandra," said Tonks. "It's only five Galleons, after all."

Kingsley chuckled as Cassandra smiled through her tears and said, "Shut up, Tonks." She handed Neville five Galleons.

"I'm not going to spend them, of course," said Neville. "I'm just going to keep them, to remind me of her."

"I hope that wasn't all she said, Neville," said Kingsley humorously.

"No, Cassandra, she said to tell you that she appreciates how you've looked after me, and that she loves you." Obviously overwhelmed, Cassandra struggled to hold back more tears.

Near the end of the day, when their training was finished, Harry and Neville went back to the room with the fireplace in time to greet Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Pansy, who had just arrived. Kingsley walked in and said, "Thanks for coming. I assume Harry told you that we wanted to test you, to see if Hermione's theory about the energy of love is right. Certainly it's started to look that way; Neville is obviously stronger today than he was last week. It's not a huge jump in power like Harry's in April, but it's very noticeable. We'll be very interested to see what the tests show."

He cast the test spell on himself, and asked Harry to go first, as a test. Harry silently cast Blue on him, and saw a gold 100 appear in the air next to Kingsley. "Okay, Hermione, you next," said Kingsley. She pointed her wand at him, and another gold 100 appeared. Hermione smiled broadly as Kingsley said, "Looks like you're right. Neville, you now." Neville took his turn, and there was yet another 100. "Amazing," said Kingsley. "Do you know how few wizards ever get 100, and there are three right here? Harry is obviously very much on to something. Ron?" Ron fired the spell, and a gold 94 popped up. Ron looked disappointed, but Kingsley said, "That's still really good, Ron, we have some Aurors who don't get 94. Ginny?"

Ginny stepped forward, cast the spell, and saw yet another gold 100; she smiled as she stepped back. Pansy tried and got 87, but was happy. "That's really good; when I did it in class at the beginning of the year, I only got 55. I've never been that good with a wand."

"Looks like you're getting better," said Kingsley. "Now the question is, could Neville and Ginny use Harry's new spells as well. What were your initial scores on this test?"

"Mine was 79, and Ginny's a fifth year, so she hadn't done it yet," said Neville. "As for whether we could use his spells, I want to try."

Most people there looked surprised, but Harry wasn't; he had expected Neville to want to try, but he didn't know about Ginny. Kingsley said, "Are you sure, Neville? I tried it once, and I was wrong. It's pretty bad if you are."

"I think I can do it," said Neville determinedly.

Hermione took his hand, concerned. "You may be able to, but you have to remember that it doesn't completely work the first time; it didn't for Harry, or I. Even if it works, you're going to get a real blast of pain."

He nodded. "I know. But don't you think it's better to have that happen now, rather than in a real-life situation?"

"Yes, I see your point," she agreed reluctantly. "But it's still very brave."

He looked at Kingsley, who said, "All right, Neville. Let me know when you're ready."

Neville concentrated, then looked up. "Go ahead."

Kingsley counted down, and to Harry's relief, the shield came on just as Kingsley said the word 'Crucio.' As had happened with Harry and Hermione, some of the spell got through, and Neville screamed, but for less than a second, and fell to the ground. His shield faded, and Hermione helped him up and hugged him. "That's wonderful, Neville, I'm so glad you can do it."

He let her go after a few seconds and asked Kingsley to do it again. "I know it'll work, but it's just for my peace of mind, to have had one time where it worked completely." Kingsley did it again, and as expected, it worked perfectly. Very satisfied, Neville stepped back, and was rewarded with a kiss from Hermione.

"I want to do it, too," said Ginny, looking at Harry. He understood, but was still concerned for her. She gave him a reassuring smile, and faced Kingsley. It went exactly as Neville's had; the shield came on the first time but she suffered a short burst of intense pain, then it worked perfectly the second time. Harry proudly put an arm around her.

"That's pretty amazing," said Ron. "I'd like to try too, but I have a feeling it wouldn't be a good idea, not until I get to 100."

"That's okay, Ron, I would have refused to do it anyway," said Kingsley. "New rule, no one gets to try this until they're at 100. Funny, I've been at 100 for years now, but I failed when I tried."

"What I'd assume," said Hermione, "is that you can get 100 without using the energy of love, though it's very rare, but that you will always get 100 if you're using it completely. Maybe Ron and Pansy are well along the way, just not quite there yet." Harry grinned to himself, knowing that there was a joke begging to be made about

how if Ron and Pansy would just get together they would reach 100, but he knew no one would make it. Ron had a somewhat embarrassed look, as if he expected someone to do so.

"Looks that way," agreed Kingsley. "Also, it's hard not to notice that the four of you with 100 are the ones in relationships. Probably it helps a lot if you have a particular person to focus on. We Aurors may be disadvantaged in that area; the married ones may have to show us the way." He looked at Cassandra, who smiled.

"But I had 100 long before I was in a relationship," pointed out Harry.

"Well, he said it helps, not that you had to be," said Hermione. "Besides, you had extreme motivation of another kind."

"That's true," Harry said. "But I was thinking about something else last night, since I thought something like this might happen. Aurors have to know Dark magic, and sometimes you use it, right? Even if not in real situations, like you just used the Cruciatus Curse there, and I think you have to be in a negative frame of mind, even if only unconsciously, to use it. I wondered, what if you can't use the energy of love for your spells if you sometimes use spells that require that kind of frame of mind?"

"But you used the Cruciatus Curse once, or at least, tried to," said Kingsley, somewhat apologetically, as if not wanting to remind Harry of the circumstances.

"Yes, and later swore to myself never to do it again," Harry answered. "It's just a thought, I could be totally wrong. I just wonder if we have to choose one or the other. I asked Albus about it last night, and he said he thought it was very likely. It was funny, because when I talk to him, it seems to me as though I'm speaking, but really I'm just thinking, so he hears me whether I speak or think. I was thinking that he should be able to know, and he said, 'Just because I am dead, it does not mean I have become omniscient.'" The others laughed. "I said, 'It would be nice, though.'"

"Nice to see that dying hasn't taken away his sense of humor," said Kingsley wryly. "It's an interesting thought, Harry. You could be right, it's just so hard to know at this stage. It's amazing, it's like you're founding a whole new branch of magic."

Harry grinned in embarrassment. "It's pretty convenient that I'm the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, then. You almost have to wonder if Albus knew something when he asked me to take the job."

"I'd say that anyone who can talk from where he is could do anything, but then again, he did have a bit of a checkered history with that job," joked Kingsley.

"He couldn't help that no one good was available for the position most of the time," said Ginny. "He was just waiting until Harry got old enough."

"Yes, that must be it," said Harry, deadpan.

"Before you all head back to Hogwarts, there's something I need to give you and talk to you about," said Kingsley. He walked over to a chest in a corner and took out a box. "This came up because of how Malfoy threatened you," he said as he looked at Pansy. "Most of your protection is already taken care of, since you'll be staying at the Burrow, along with... well, if he's not the most powerful wizard in the world right now, I don't know who is." Harry tried not to look as embarrassed as he felt as Pansy grinned mischievously, knowing how he would feel. "Anyway, this was done with Pansy in mind, but we arranged it so that it works for all six of you, knowing how close you all are, and it wasn't that much extra effort."

He opened the box to reveal six pendants. Each was circular and was one solid color; they looked like stones, but the colors didn't seem to be the type that would come naturally to stones. They weren't very thick, and were about two centimeters in diameter.

"Sorry that we didn't know enough about all of you to make the colors specific to each person," said Kingsley, "but I bet you all can guess which one is Harry's."

"The green one, of course," said Pansy. Harry realized that the color of the green pendant was almost exactly that of his eyes.

Kingsley nodded. "It seemed appropriate. Gold is Ron, red is Ginny, pink is Pansy, blue is Neville, and orange is Hermione. Dumbledore told you that Pansy would be given something that would be an alarm if Malfoy got close enough to it. If he gets within a hundred yards of her, all your pendants will make a whistling noise; the closer he is, the louder it'll be. Another nice feature they have is a kind of a distress signal that you don't have to activate. This monitors your heart rate and adrenaline levels, and if they suddenly shoot up, or reach a certain level, the color of that person will blink rapidly on the other pendants. So, if Pansy were under threat, everyone else's pendants would blink with a pink color, and make a noise. Unfortunately, only Harry could come to her aid instantly even if he didn't know where she was, because Fawkes would take him. But I've had these linked in with the Security department of the Magic Detection Center, so if any of them goes off, we'll know immediately, and we'll know where the person is. We could Apparate there within seconds, by which time I suspect we'd find that Harry had already taken care of the situation." This got a laugh from everyone except Harry, who managed a smile.

"What if one of us gets a jolt of adrenaline for some other reason?" asked Hermione. "Wouldn't it cause some false alarms?"

"No," answered Kingsley, "we've been using these long enough to have worked that out; having your life under threat causes a much stronger reaction than someone you didn't realize was behind you suddenly yelling. There's one more feature, and it's only partly security-related: these can also function as communication devices. If

Harry wants to contact Pansy, he holds his pendant and says 'pink,' and her pendant will slowly blink with his color, letting her know he wants to talk to her. She says his color, and then they can hear each other. Any number can do it at once; one of you could speak to all the others at the same time if you wanted. We Aurors talk to each other using things like this. And if one of you sets off the adrenaline alarm, that one's pendant immediately becomes an open channel; all other pendants can hear what's going on at that one."

"Wow... this is terrific," said Pansy, as the others' faces showed that they shared the sentiment.

"Thanks, Kingsley, this is great," said Harry sincerely.

Kingsley shook his head. "Most of the work was done by others; like I've said, Aurors tend to get things they ask for. And we have a tradition of doing things Dumbledore asks us to do. We'll still do that, of course, but now Harry will have to relay his messages."

"You can be sure I will, if he has something to say," said Harry.

"I really like the ability to communicate," said Neville, still very impressed. "I'll be able to talk to Hermione without using the fireplace... and from bed, even if there's no picture."

Harry and the others put on their pendants. He felt very connected to the others, but not because of the pendants; he realized the pendants were a symbol of the connection they already felt.

The next day, Harry began both giving and taking examinations. His days this week would be longer, because giving each student ten minutes took over three hours instead of the normal two for each class; he was busy until six o'clock, which left him just the evenings to study for his own exams. He was busy each day until Friday, which was essentially a day off for him; Dumbledore's death meant that exams in his class for sixth years were cancelled, and Harry didn't have to give any exams for his fifth years, as they were taking their O.W.L.s. The Astronomy O.W.L. re-test scheduled for last Friday had of course been rescheduled after Dumbledore's death earlier that day, moving to Wednesday of the final week. Harry didn't particularly care about taking it at all, but went through with it as a gesture to Hermione, although she didn't seem nearly as bothered by the whole situation as she had been at the beginning of the year. ("What happened this year sort of put that in perspective for me," she said.)

In deference to Harry's schedule, Snape had waited until Friday to request his first meeting with Harry since finalizing their arrangement. The memories Snape accessed were mainly from Harry's childhood, before he had known he was a wizard.

Some of them were similar to the ones he had seen during the previous year's Occlumency sessions; Snape told Harry that no attempt to do anything similar was intended, which Harry understood. "It's not your fault I have so few happy memories before I was eleven," he assured Snape. He knew Snape was simply starting at the beginning, so to speak, to understand Harry's life better. Snape actually found a few memories that Harry had forgotten, but they were no more pleasant than the ones he remembered.

Friday night saw the end-of-the-year feast, at which the House Cup was awarded to the House with the most points. Slytherin had won, in a close contest with Gryffindor. Harry was pleased; now that Malfoy's influence was gone from Slytherin, it would be able to cooperate better with the other houses, and Harry wanted to encourage that. He knew that there were still plenty of Slytherins who were prejudiced against non-pure-blood wizards-after all, Slytherin was where the Sorting Hat tended to put such people-but Dumbledore had pointed out to him earlier in the year that working with other Houses and being around different kinds of people would help change such attitudes. Harry asked the Gryffindors before the feast to give the Slytherins a healthy round of applause, and he asked the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff prefects to make the same request of their house's students. All did so, and when the award was announced by McGonagall, Harry could see that most Slytherins were very pleased at the loud support they got from the other houses.

After the feast, there was a social event for the staff, to allow them to say their goodbyes for the year. Harry talked to everyone at least once, even Professor Trelawney, whose attitude towards him seemed to have warmed a bit, though he had hardly seen her all year. At the end of the event, McGonagall led them in a moment of silence in Dumbledore's honor, and thanked them for all of their efforts for the year.

Harry took the opportunity to thank the teachers for their support throughout the year. "I was afraid that some teachers might not like the idea of a sixteen-year-old teacher, but you never made me feel as though I didn't belong here. You cared about me, you teased me... you made me look forward to coming to this room every day. Thank you for that."

Flitwick replied, "We're just happy to see a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher survive the year," to general laughter. As the party broke up, Harry got handshakes from his fellow teachers as they wished him a good summer.

Before he could leave, McGonagall found him and told him that she wanted to talk to him privately, and asked him to call Ginny to have her join them. He did, and soon Ginny was knocking at the door of the staff room. The three of them walked to

Dumbledore's quarters, and sat down. "Are these going to become your quarters now?" asked Harry.

"No, and that is part of what I wanted to talk to you about," McGonagall replied. "The fact is, the quarters I now occupy are the ones designed to be the headmaster's; he was entitled to them when he became headmaster, but he felt these were more than adequate, and had me take the slightly larger ones instead. Harry, you were never assigned teachers' quarters, because it was understood that you would stay in Gryffindor Tower, and I assume you will next year as well. Nonetheless, I would like you to think of these as your quarters; they will remain yours should you decide to stay on past next year. This solves the immediate question of what to do with Albus's belongings; they will remain here, for you to deal with as you see fit. I think he knew as well that you would consider it a particular honor."

I sure do, Harry thought. He very much liked the idea that he would get to stay in these quarters, around Dumbledore's belongings, and be able to talk to Dumbledore about them if he wanted to. "Yes, thank you, Professor. I'm very happy to be able to have these quarters, even if I don't stay in them much for the next year."

McGonagall pursed her lips, seemingly unhappy at what she was going to say next. "He also made a particular request of me... one which I know amused him to do, because he knew how I would feel about it, and that I would grant it anyway, despite my feelings. He and I were aware that you occasionally used your office as a place for the two of you to have some privacy. I am not saying it was for the purpose you think I am referring to," she added quickly, forestalling his objection. "I know that couples need to be able to talk privately from time to time. In any case, he wanted the two of you to be able to come here to be alone if you wished."

Harry and Ginny looked at each other, eyes wide. He knew they were both thinking the same thing: that there was a bed in the next room. There would be nothing to stop them from doing anything they wanted-except, of course, for the situation with Snape-and unlike the Burrow, no need to fear being called or interrupted at any time.

Now McGonagall looked amused. "The looks on your faces could hardly be more transparent, you know." Dropping her austere manner, McGonagall looked at them fondly. "Harry, Ginny... it is difficult for me especially as the headmistress to approve of this, so let me just talk to you as a person for right now. Albus was always very relaxed about this kind of thing, much more so than I could be. About this particular situation, Harry, he felt that you may be only sixteen-though I know you will be seventeen soon-but that you deserved to be treated with the consideration and privileges of an adult, especially now that you bear such serious responsibilities."

Harry cut in before she could continue, because he thought he knew what she was referring to. "Just so you know, Professor... Minerva," he amended, noticing her look reminding him that she was just a person right then, "Professor Snape has given me permission to discuss his situation with Ginny as well as Hermione."

She raised her eyebrows. "Yes, that was one of the responsibilities I was referring to. In addition, despite your ages, you have chosen to be in a committed relationship, which is another adult responsibility. He considered the situation much as though you were a married couple. It is difficult for me to see it that way, but I do see his point. You know that I am pleased for both of you, and wish you nothing but happiness." Harry was touched, and could see that Ginny was too.

"I ask only that you be discreet," she continued. "Not that you would not do this anyway, but I expect only your circle of friends to know about this, and Ginny not to be seen coming to or leaving this room. Fortunately, as you have Fawkes, you need not go skulking around the castle." She stood up. "You both should be getting back to Gryffindor Tower very soon."

They stood as well, and followed her out of the room. Harry wanted to stay just to look at everything, but he knew he would be able to soon enough.

"Wow, this is amazing," said Ginny, as soon as they were out of McGonagall's hearing range. "It was so good of him to do this for us. And since we have Fawkes, we can go there any time we want during the summer, and not have to worry about getting privacy at the Burrow. That is, as much privacy as we can ever get, now."

He nodded. "How are you doing with that? We haven't talked about it for a few days, we've both been so busy."

She shrugged. "I think I'm getting used to the idea, but I don't know if I'll know for sure until the time actually comes." Harry could understand that, as he felt more or less the same way himself.

* * * * *

As the Hogwarts Express started its journey to London the next day, Harry had the thought that it was a good thing that the compartments could fit six people. He and his friends had unconsciously taken the same positions they did at the table in the Great Hall; Hermione, Harry, and Ron on one side, with Neville, Ginny, and Pansy facing them. Hermione was holding Crookshanks, Fawkes was on Harry's shoulder, and Harry and Ron had Hedwig and Pigwidgeon in their cages. Harry realized that he had hardly used Hedwig at all this year; he wondered if Hedwig would feel displaced by Fawkes, though Harry thought of Fawkes as more of a person than a pet.

"So, Ginny, how do you think you did on your O.W.L.s?" asked Pansy.

She shrugged. "Okay, I guess. They're pretty tough, as you all know. The only one I felt really confident about was Defense Against the Dark Arts. I probably could have gotten an Outstanding even last year if I'd taken it then. How about you guys and your finals?"

"Pretty difficult, but they want them to be that way, to get us used to the idea of what the N.E.W.T.s will be like," answered Ron. "It's not like they're going to throw us out of the school if we don't do well enough. I remember when they wanted us to think they would. McGonagall seemed to like to give that impression."

Harry chuckled. "Some of them told me they do that on purpose, especially to first years, to try to scare them into better study habits. McGonagall said it actually has happened, but the other teachers asked her about it, and she admitted it was only twice in her time there, and it was basically students who refused to study at all."

"I assume you didn't, Harry," said Neville. "How did your students do, especially the first years?"

"Pretty well," said Harry. "It was hard for me to remember exactly what I knew when I finished my first year, but I'm pretty sure they're better than I was then. Some of the first years are better than some of the second years, because the second years were essentially first years in this subject, thanks to Umbridge. But no, I didn't threaten anyone, obviously. I really didn't care what they knew from books, just what they could do with their wands. If it was up to me, the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s in this subject wouldn't have written parts at all."

"Well, by all means, start sending owls to the testing boards," joked Ron, "tell them that. They'll listen to Harry Potter."

"I have a feeling, Harry," said Hermione with a playful frown, "that when you're headmaster and I'm deputy headmistress, we'll have a few arguments on this subject."

Momentarily ignoring the surprised looks from Ron, Pansy, and Neville, Harry replied, "Yeah, but I'll be the headmaster, so I'll get my way."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," said Hermione, looking like she knew something he didn't. Of course, that's usually the case, Harry thought.

To the others, he explained what McGonagall had told him and Hermione the evening Dumbledore died. They were surprised, but not astounded. "It seems reasonable, now that I think about it," said Pansy. "I know that being deputy headmaster at eighteen seems a bit much, but considering who you are, I think it'll make sense to a lot of people, since it'll be clear that it's so you can be headmaster after McGonagall retires."

"And you'll have Hermione there, to threaten the first years that they'll fail and be expelled if they don't study hard enough," said Ron with a smile.

Hermione gave him a mildly reproving look and said, "Yes, if it happens, I probably will. After all, it worked with me."

"Are you sure it isn't only going to work for people like you?" asked Ron, smirking.

Hermione ignored his provocation and replied, "I seem to remember you being a bit worried, back when you were a naive first year," with a superior expression.

Ron ignored her comment altogether, leading Harry to think it was probably true. Then he said, "I just realized something, Harry... You'll be teaching us next year, won't you? I mean, with all the Auror stuff you did, you'll be totally qualified."

"I suppose so," Harry agreed, sad that Dumbledore would not be teaching him again next year. "Although I don't know how I'm going to have a study schedule, teaching all seven years of students. Then again, I don't have to take Defense Against the Dark Arts, because who would teach it to me? Wonder if they'll give me credit for it anyway. But, yeah, I'll be teaching it. Neville, you can be my assistant."

The rest chuckled, including Neville, who saluted, making Harry laugh. They then had to explain the reference to Pansy, who hadn't been around the first time it had happened. She said, "I kind of wished they could have transferred me to Gryffindor after Malfoy left, I really wanted to be able to hang out with the rest of you, be around for everyday stuff like that. But at least I got to be a kind of heroine to the Slytherin first years after saving Harry's life, so that was nice. Harry's always so embarrassed when people praise him like that, but with my ego the way it was, I was really happy about it. I was like, yeah, tell me more!" The others laughed at her self-deprecating humor.

"Well, you'll get to do plenty of hanging out over the summer," said Ron. "With Ginny and Harry and I, and I have a feeling Hermione and Neville will be over every now and then."

"I'll be over more often than that, Ron," said Hermione. "I was going to surprise you, just to have some fun with you when we got back to the station... but I'm staying at the Burrow too." Enjoying Ron's startled expression, she continued, "Think about it. Voldemort had the Death Eaters grab me because I was involved in some plan to undermine him, that's all he was told. He probably doesn't even know now what that was. Even if he knows that stuff was rubbed into him, he still wouldn't know what it was for, unless he had another spy somewhere. The point is, we have to assume that he may still want to know whatever it is he thinks I know. My home is totally exposed, they could just go in there and grab me. The next time he saw Voldemort after last Friday, Snape told him that he had discovered that I would be

staying at the Burrow. I talked to Snape about this earlier this week, and he said that he thought it was 'unlikely in the extreme' that my parents would be targeted if I wasn't there. He said that with the ban on Apparation, Voldemort's decided that operations have to have a strategic objective; in other words, they can't just be for the heck of it. Snape is sure that Voldemort thinks there would be zero strategic advantage in doing anything to my parents."

Ron looked puzzled. "But they could just take your parents, and say, tell us what we want to know, or..."

"I said that to Snape, and he said that Harry's refusal to give up his wand gave Voldemort a bit of a shock; he's not going to want to count on that sort of thing. Also, my parents have been outfitted with the same kind of thing that Harry's cousin Dudley got."

"Then they know what you're involved in? Aren't they worried?" asked Ron.

"They don't know. Apparently Aurors visited my home after they got back from the hospital. They put a calming spell on my parents, took their wedding rings, and imbued them so they'd go off in the presence of anyone magical except Neville or I. If Death Eaters show up, the Aurors will be there before they can get away. They could have done that and I still could have lived there, but I'm afraid my being there might tempt them into trying. Anyway, the Aurors put a Memory Charm on my parents after they were done. I was glad they could do it that way."

"Yeah, I remember the Aurors talking about that," said Neville. "They said it's much easier to protect Muggles than wizards, because you can't give a wizard something like that, it would always be going off."

Hermione agreed. "Voldemort knows about this kind of thing, of course, he'll assume it, and that's another reason not to go after my parents. No, all the stuff they want is going to be right there, at the Burrow. Your parents are really brave," she said to Ron and Ginny.

"You should include me in that, Hermione, now they're my parents too," joked Harry. "But, yeah, they really are. It's great of them to do this."

"Mum'll just say that it's a good excuse to have a lot of kids in the house," said Ginny. "But there's no way they'll attack that, it's too heavily defended, not to mention that their prime target is now someone they're terrified of."

"I doubt that they're 'terrified' of me," said Harry, "but I see what you mean. They're bound to be concerned. Also, Snape confirmed what Albus told me after he died... it still sounds strange to say that... but he said that Voldemort doesn't know what caused him to go unconscious, but thinks I did it. He's not going to come anywhere near me for a while."

"Why does he think you did it?" asked Pansy.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord..." quoted Harry. "He knows that I can beat him, or at least have the potential to. Also, twice this year I've come up with spells that were totally new, and effective against Dark magic. Who's to say I didn't come up with something else new, on the spur of the moment? Not to mention that it ties in perfectly with what Hermione said, when she was taunting him. I'm sure he remembered that."

Ron shook his head in amazement. "It's funny to think that... here all these years everyone's so deathly afraid of Voldemort, and now, here he is, afraid of you."

"Well, all I care about is that he'll stay away from me if he's afraid of me, so we can have a nice, quiet summer," said Harry.

Pansy smiled knowingly. "I bet I know the first thing you'll do when you get there, try to figure out when Mrs. Weasley will be gone, so you and Ginny can be in a room alone."

"No, we've actually got that worked out," Ginny said happily, and went on to tell them about Harry taking over Dumbledore's quarters. The others were impressed.

"It must've killed McGonagall to tell you that," said Hermione. "But that's really great for you, you can just go anytime you want."

"Wish we could do that," mused Neville.

"Maybe Fawkes would take you if Harry asked him to," suggested Ron.

Harry shook his head. "I wish I could, but it couldn't happen anyway. Letting anyone else use it would be a sort of violation of her trust; I know full well that it's intended only for my use."

"I suppose so... but I'm still curious about what Fawkes would think," said Ron, reaching over to pet him. "Imagine this, then... you find out about some place that's totally isolated, like on some island somewhere, that's really nice and there's no people and nothing dangerous. Hermione and Neville could be alone, but since they can't Apparate now, they can't get there. Would Fawkes take them if you asked him?"

Hermione answered. "Well, from reading *Reborn From the Ashes*, I would think-

Harry cut her off with a gesture. "Actually, I'd like to try something. I want to ask Fawkes that, and see if I can understand his answer, if he gives one."

Neville looked puzzled. "How can you do that?"

"Everyone be quiet for a few minutes, let me see what I can get," asked Harry. They were quiet, and after five minutes, Harry spoke again. "Okay, I think I have an answer. By the way, Neville, to answer your question... the more time a phoenix spends around his companion, the stronger their nonverbal communication becomes. Albus taught me that the way to communicate with Fawkes is that he'll kind of send

me impressions and feelings. The only thing I have to do is to know which impressions and feelings are mine, and which came from him. With more time, it'll happen naturally; it was limited up until now because he was bonded to Albus also, and couldn't completely communicate with two people at the same time.

"The answer to Ron's question, I think, is that by choosing me, Fawkes has already said that he trusts my judgment. We all know how loyal phoenixes are, and Fawkes knows how close I am to all of you, so he would help you if he could, if you ever needed it, like he helped me in the Chamber of Secrets four years ago. If I asked him to do what Ron suggested, he would do it. What I have to think about before asking him is whether it's important enough. If it was just a matter of Neville and Hermione preferring the island, but had other chances to be alone, I shouldn't ask him. But if it was the only way, and if it was important to them, then I could ask him. Fawkes will just take it as a given that if I ask him for something, it's important enough for him to do it. So, it's not a matter of what Fawkes would do, it's a matter of what I would do, what judgment I would make. Part of my obligation is to not use him for unimportant things. So, Hermione, how close was that to what you were going to say?"

"Very close," she said. "I was just going to say that it all comes down to Fawkes trusting you."

"You know, if it was necessary in some situation, you could summon Fawkes if you needed to, he would appear," said Harry to the others. "You just swish your wand around like this, and say his name."

"But we should only do it if it's pretty important," clarified Pansy.

"Well, it doesn't have to be a life-threatening emergency," said Harry. "Just something that's necessary and can only be done with his help."

"That reminds me, I was wondering about something," said Hermione. "If you use Dumbledore's quarters, I should say, your new quarters, over the summer, you're going to have to tell Mrs. Weasley where you're going, she'd worry if you were just gone. Do you think she's going to approve of this? I mean, Ginny's still only fifteen, and you'll have the chance to do... well, anything you want," she finished, looking embarrassed and apologetic.

"I hadn't thought too much about that, this just happened last night. I can't deny that I'd like to do... anything I want," said Ginny, smiling at Harry. Catching her meaning, Harry smiled back, though a bit embarrassed at that kind of thing being referred to in front of the others. "But Harry and I haven't even talked about that yet, so I'm sure we will before we talk to Mum. But yes, we do have to talk to her. That should be an interesting conversation."

There was silence for a few seconds, then Ron cleared his throat and said, "So, that was a great Quidditch season, wasn't it?" The others laughed at Ron's acknowledgment of his discomfort with the turn the conversation had taken. The conversation moved on to other topics as the train continued on its way to London.

As the Hogwarts Express pulled into King's Cross, Harry and the others stood and got their trunks from the luggage racks. Harry felt it was strange to think that he would only be doing this once more; even if he stayed at Hogwarts after he graduated, he would not be taking the Hogwarts Express again. He supposed he could if he really wanted to, remembering that Remus had done so when he had taught, but it would seem strange. It also wouldn't be the same if he couldn't do it with his friends.

He and Ron were the last of the group to approach the barrier leading to the main part of the station. Fawkes took flight and disappeared as he had let Harry know he would, as he couldn't be in an area where he could be seen by Muggles.

Harry and Ron walked through, pulling their carts, to see Molly standing next to Tonks and Cassandra. He said hello to the two Aurors and hugged Molly. Ron tapped him on the shoulder, gesturing to a spot down the platform. Harry did a double-take as he saw Dudley walking toward them.

"Dammit," he heard Tonks say to Cassandra. "It's okay, I'll go tell them." She ran through the barrier. Harry realized that she was going to Apparate to wherever Dudley's magic-sensing device was monitored, to let them know that there was no emergency, and that she was annoyed that Dudley had deliberately gone where there would be wizards other than Harry, knowing it would set off his device.

"Hello, Harry," said Dudley, walking up and shaking his hand. "I would ask you if you had a good year, but I kind of know already." He turned his attention to Ginny. "You're Ginny, you're his girlfriend. I'm Dudley, nice to meet you," he said, shaking her hand. "And you must be Hermione, I talked to you on the phone. And Ron, and... Neville," he said, shaking hands with each. "You three saved him in... what's the name of that place..."

"Hogsmeade," automatically replied a surprised Neville. Harry's jaw dropped as he watched.

"Yes, that's it, those names are hard to remember," said Dudley. "And you're Pansy, the spy. Glad to hear you got Malfoy out of there." She shook his hand, giving Harry a look that said, 'what's going on?' Harry had no idea.

Dudley looked at him, smiling. "Well, I'd say it was worth coming here just to see that look. I was in London anyway. Mum and Dad got your letter, so don't worry, they knew not to come. I doubt they'd be happy if they knew I was here."

Harry was still astonished, and he asked the only question he could think of. "How did you know all that?"

Dudley's smile grew wider. "Yeah, figured you'd be surprised. I was a bit too, when I got back from school a week ago. Mum said we weren't going to get you, that you were staying with them. The next day, when she wasn't home, I went looking around the house, just to see what had changed. I found a folder in the kitchen with all these articles cut out of a newspaper, that one for you lot. Apparently some witch has been cutting them out if they have to do with you and sending them to Mum, just so she can know what you've been up to. There was also the letter from you in there, saying you couldn't stop them from doing that, so I guess she complained to you about it. Took me the better part of an afternoon to read them. Seems like you're even more famous in that world than you told us."

As he spoke, Tonks had walked back to join them. Without interrupting Dudley, she took the pendant off his neck, and used the same spell Dumbledore had used so that she wouldn't activate its magic. She had Cassandra do the same, then started handing it to Harry's friends in turn.

"He's gotten a lot more famous just this year," Hermione said.

"Yeah, but what I have to wonder is..." Harry trailed off.

"...why she kept them, yeah, I wondered too," agreed Dudley. "I wondered if I shouldn't ask her, but I was too curious, so I did. She looked annoyed that I saw them, and said that she didn't want to throw them away in the normal trash, that because they were magic, they might blow something up, or something. Said she was waiting for you to give them to so you could get rid of them."

"You should have brought them, I could have started a scrapbook," said Ginny.

"You're going to start being in them more too, you know, you shouldn't say that," said Harry, teasing her back.

Dudley asked about the Joining of Hands, then about Fawkes, who he seemed surprised not to see with Harry. After Harry answered both questions, Dudley said, "Well, I could ask questions for an hour, but I don't want to keep you."

"You could send an owl," Harry suggested with a small smile, imagining how Petunia would feel about it.

"I could, if I had one," Dudley pointed out.

"If you write a letter and decide you want to send it, I think Hedwig will show up," said Harry. "The owls we use have a way of doing that."

Dudley looked impressed. "Maybe I will. Oh, and I'm sorry about Professor Dumbledore. He was really amazing."

Harry nodded. "Thanks. Believe me, you don't know the half of it."

"I believe it," Dudley agreed. "See you." He waved to everyone and walked off.

Harry was still a bit stunned. "That was... very strange," he said to no one in particular.

"You mean that Dudley is being friendly, or that your aunt kept those articles?" asked Ron, who also looked surprised.

"More the second one. She doesn't really think anything could happen by throwing them away, I have to imagine."

"Well, Harry," said Hermione, "if you've inspired the magical public to say Voldemort's name and respect and admire you, maybe it's not so hard to imagine you've inspired her to think maybe you're not so bad."

Harry looked doubtful. "Considering how my childhood was, I think that would be more amazing than inspiring the wizarding public."

Molly put an arm around Harry. "Anything's possible, Harry. Maybe you should visit over the summer, see how they react to you."

Harry was trying to be polite, but he wasn't sure he would care even if Petunia's attitude had in fact changed. "I think I've had enough of their reactions to me for now. I know what you mean, maybe it would be different. All I can say is, it wouldn't be up high on my list of things I'd like to do."

"People can change, Harry," said Molly. "Look at you, look at how much you've changed since last year."

"Also me, obviously," put in Pansy. "If someone had told me a year ago that I'd be where I am now, with the friends I have, I would have said they were crazy. I mean, I don't know if your aunt's going to be good to you or not, just that stranger things have happened."

Harry chuckled. "You're saying the words, but it's almost like I can hear Albus's voice. This is exactly the kind of thing he said to me more than once. Well, I promise I'll think of it as something that's not impossible. I think that's the most I can do right now."

"I'm sure he wouldn't ask more of you than that," said Molly fondly. "Hermione, you know we're very happy to have you with us as well. Neville, dear, do you want to come with us, then take a fireplace back to your home?"

"Yes, thanks," said Neville. "I'm not letting him out of my sight anyway, until he's someplace secure."

Harry looked around at his friends and the Aurors. "It feels pretty secure here," he said.

Neville raised an eyebrow. "We'll be the judge of that, Harry. We know you have a lot of responsibilities and things to worry about, and we know one thing you've chosen not to worry about is your own safety. We do that for you; all you have to do is just do what we tell you, and not argue."

Harry glanced at the others, who gave him looks emphasizing what Neville had said. He felt a surge of emotion, thankful that he had friends like this. "Thank you, Neville," he said. "Let's go home." For the first time in his life, home would be a place where he wanted to go, and where he was wanted and loved. Hand in hand with Ginny, surrounded by his friends, Harry headed home.